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KOKORO-CONNECT CLIP-TIME

ココロコネクト  
クリップタイム



# Kokoro Connect - Volume 04.5 - Clip Time

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クリップタイム

ファミ通文庫





「うおおおおおおおおおおおおおお」

地鳴りのような歓声が上がる。

ステージの中心で、  
押し寄せる喝采を浴びているのは、  
紛れもない、永瀬伊織だった。

9月





10月

そうなのだ。  
これは、れっきとした、『デート』なのだ。  
「どうしよう……。デートなんてやったことないよ」

それよりもお前には  
気づくべきことがあるだろう、と稲葉は心の中で呟く。  
流石にパンチラはしないが  
このギリギリ感は相当……。くるはずだ（稲葉姫子調べ）。

11月





皆さんが普段やっていることをきちんと体験して、  
それについて行けてこそ……、本当の部活見学ってもんです

それなら、俺も走りますよ。トレーニングにもなるし

えんじょうじし の  
円城寺紫乃

うわちひろ  
宇和千尋

やえがし たいち  
八重樫太一



「なんだいみんなノリノリじゃん！  
こうなったら……全員で走るしかないじゃん！」

4月  
新学期

なが せ い おり  
永瀬伊織



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# **The Correct Way to Use a Scoop Photo**





○ーへー📎 スクープ写真の正しい使い方 📎ーへー○



"The 'strength' when all five of us are gathered is quite something, don't you



think?"

Before Yaegashi Taichi's eyes, Nagase Iori abruptly asked a question.

Nagase, who was like the ideal, beautiful girl brought into reality, would occasionally ask questions for purposes that he could not grasp.

"Strength, you say..... What kind?"

Taichi asked back.

"Well, in general, or something like that."

"Your vague explanation makes it difficult for me to comment."

"Anyways, I really think that there are quite a few things the five of us together can do that other people can't."

Yaegashi Taichi.

Nagase Iori.

Inaba Himeko.

Kiriyama Yui.

Aoki Yoshifumi.

If they are together, they can do anything.

"Certainly Inaba and Kiriyama, and even Nagase and Aoki too, excel in all kinds of areas and I think that it's amazing when they're all together. Well, I'm nothing compared to them though."

*I'm not being self-deprecating here. If you look at the other members' personalities, I'm just an ordinary existence compared to them.*

"Nah, you're wrong about that. There's only meaning when all five of us are together."

Nagase twirled her tied up hair around her finger.

"Is that so? Well, I don't plan on denying it."

If she had said "That's right" and smiled, our conversation would have probably ended. But for some reason, she chose to take a different attitude.

"Then, Taichi, if you have to pick one member out of us five, who do you think is the most important member of the group? Ah, there's no other motives behind this."

"Well, obviously it would be the person who essentially leads us, Nagase or Inaba....."

"Wow! You really don't understand, huh, Taichi?"

Nagase sighed and her shoulders drooped, as if to say "Give me a break."

"The number one key member is undoubtedly Yaegashi Taichi."

Taichi, being engulfed by voice that seemed to permeate his chest, nodded for a brief moment..... and then he hurriedly shook his head.

"No, no, that can't be possible....."

"Yes it is."

"That's because, I—"

"Yes it is."

"It isn—"

"Yes it is."

".....OK, I understand, so please let me say something."

"Do you not want to believe that you're that kind of person?"

"It's not that I don't want to believe it, it's that I can't believe it, I think."

"Huhhhh..... What's wrong with trying to believe it? Thinking of yourself as a necessary existence isn't a particularly bad way of living, right?"

".....Well that's true. Thinking that way is good, right?"

However, Taichi couldn't think of himself the center of the 5 people.

"Ummm, as I thought, I want you to think this way, Taichi."

"I'm not that amazing of a person, but it would be great if I could be that idealized image."

While talking in the light-hearted conversation, Taichi had observed that



Nagase was seemingly disappointed, and had wanted to answer to her expectations.

But even if it was for the purpose of appeasing Nagase, he would feel bad saying something insincerely.

"A necessary person, huh?"

The murmur that leaked from Taichi's mouth didn't just stop at Nagase's ears, but also dispersed in the room.

"By the way, I'm RE-AL-LY hu-ng-ry-!"

.....With Nagase's random yell, the serious atmosphere in the room also lifted.



Yamaboshi Private High School's Cultural Research Club, also known as the CRC, is a club for "Those who cannot adhere to the existing framework, where research activities are done on various fields of culture." In other words, it is a "anything can go" kind of club where the current members are five first year students.

For a club with such a formal-sounding name, it is quite a lenient one where members can do whatever they like. The school only accepted this club on one condition: Once a month, "CR News" is distributed.

It is now in the middle of summer.

Inside the Cultural Research Club's clubroom, Taichi and the other members of the CRC sat around the long tables.

"We will now begin the meeting to report on the articles that will be published in the Cultural Research Club's Cultural Festival 'CR News Cultural Festival Extended Edition'."

As the CRC's vice president, Inaba Himeko took her position at the seat of power and read out the long title without a single fumble.

With glossy, semi-long straight black hair and a slim, sharp figure, she gives off the image of a girl who can somehow do anything.

Today they were meeting to discuss the Cultural Festival soon opening in the beginning of September, right after summer break.

"Let us go clockwise from Yui."

Inaba, with her usual authoritative demeanor, called on the small-statured and pretty Kiriya Yui, who had chestnut-colored long hair.

"Fufufu, I think you'll like mine. That's because girls from other schools and girls from middle school visiting will definitely be pleased."

Speaking with full self-confidence, Kiriya fished around in her bag and retrieved a piece of paper.

"My article is..... 'Stylish Girls Choose! Today's Top Ten Hot Cute Accessories! With These Your Cuteness Will Quickly Increase!'."

While showing off her article draft, Kiriya puffed up with pride—

"OK, next is Iori."

—Just as Inaba ignored her and continued the meeting.

"Wait, wait a second! No comments?! There should be some, right? Right?!"

Kiriya's chair shook with a clatter as she stood up.

"None."

Inaba coldly asserted.

The difference in temperature was extreme.

"Why? The two boys-better yet, the girls probably should be interested, right?!"

"My decision is made. Iori?"

Inaba pushed the conversation to Iori.

"Yeah, even if you told me about popular accessories, I wouldn't understand, right~"

Ahaha-Nagase laughed without a care in the world.



"Hm, hmph. In any case, the Cool Beauty Inaba and the number one beauty of our year, Iori, wouldn't be concerned with this kind of thing anyway."

"Well, even if you're not sulking, Kiriyama is cute enough already."

Taichi replied to Kiriyama, who was sticking her tongue out.

"Uii..... yeah. Thanks, Taichi."

Kiriyama nodded with a slightly surprised expression.

"Wait! That's my job! Even though I also agree with the cute part."

A boy with delicate features and a slim figure, Aoki Yoshifumi, cut into the conversation.

By the way, Aoki is in no way dating Kiriyama Yui. (His one-sided approach has always been given the cold shoulder) "Speaking of which, Yui, don't worry, today you're also cute!"

"Even when you say it I'm not happy in the slightest!"

The difference in temperature became somewhat extreme.

"But seriously, isn't this mostly catering to girls? However, this is a practical article and this idea should be saved for the longer 'CR News'. It's not that there's anything wrong with it, Yui."

Inaba praised. Kiriyama nodded with an unsatisfied face and sat back down. Well, her cheeks had loosened up, so she was probably content with being flattered.

"With Inaba's OK, I'm next, I guess? Mine is — this."

With a joyful expression, Nagase opened the piece of paper. By the way, Nagase is the Cultural Research Club's president.

"'Full Coverage! The Day of a Yamaboshi High School Student ~ Inaba Himeko Edition'."

"What's with reporting and distributing private information without permission?!"

"It seems like a student newspaper and it isn't bad to put one student on the spotlight, right?"

"Even though the concept is good, don't use me as the subject!"

"Eh? But when I thought about the number one thing I wanted to know right now, I came to the conclusion: 'Inaban's private Information!'"

"I'm interested in that, too."

Taichi lazily murmured.

"Ah, me too, me too!"

"I kind of want to know, too."

Aoki and Kiriyama continued.

"You guys, how much do you like me?!"

"It's because Inaban is secretive that everyone has this feeling."

"If that's the case, then Iori is better suited for this!"

Responding to Inaba's attempt at a counterattack, Nagase shook her head as if saying "Not me~".

"In any case, rejected. Definitely not allowed. How can I reveal personal information to an indefinite number of people? ..... I've got an idea. There was someone who participated in the National Sports Competition a while back; you could write an article about them."

"Eh? All I wanted was to approach Inaban's private territory~"

"Now you're making it sound even worse! In any case, I'm not doing it. Just do something about the National Sports Competition guy. With that, Iori's part has been decided. Right, next! Next is Aoki, right?"

Ignoring the dissatisfied Iori, Inaba forcibly changed the topic.

"This time, because it's the long awaited Cultural Festival Special Edition, I changed the article to a reader interactive one with a present attached. I thought of this idea because I wanted to do something different."

"Heh, sounds interesting."

Taichi said.

"Right? With that, mine is 'Request! Love Rescue Team! Solve this Troubled



Love! An Extravagant Prize Is Attached!'. "

"It does resemble a Cultural Festival plan. It doesn't sound so bad for something from Aoki."

It was a rare agreement from Inaba.

"Yes! I've been praised by Inaba-chan! But 'something from Aoki' wasn't needed!"

Nagase asked a question.

"In general, what kind of content is it?"

"Ah, Iori-chan is also overflowing with interest, right? Well then, I shall explain! A question will be posed to the readers: How does AY-san land KY-san, who hasn't responded to a date, probably due to her shyness? Detailed data will be inserted as reference material and the readers' submissions will be gathered-"

"Stop! Those initials are totally Kiriyama Yui's and Aoki Yoshifumi's, aren't they?!"

Bang! Two hands hit the table. Kiriyama yelled.

"W-Why did you have to expose it....."

"Of course it'll be exposed! And what did you mean by 'detailed data'?!"

"That's..... that way, it'll be easier for someone to come up with better ideas, and the person who gives an actual, successful suggestion will be given a present."

"That's enough, stop! So that's your idea for an extravagant prize?! If that's the case, with nothing to win, this is a completely empty lottery!"

"T-The possibility isn't zero, right? Even if it's like the chance of winning a 300000000-yen lottery, it can still happen, right?"

".....So you accept that your chances are astronomical at best, Aoki?"

Seeing Aoki getting totally dissed, the feeling to cheer for his success became a little stronger.

With Kiriyama's roar, Aoki's proposal went down the drain.

"For now, Aoki's article needs some more work. Next is Taichi, right?"

Inaba said. Taichi took out the draft of his article and opened it.

"Because the Cultural Festival will also cater to the general public, I, too, have based my idea around accommodating most people. As such, my article is 'The First Pro-wrestling Fight Viewing - If You Know This, Your Life Will Have Ten Times The Fun!'. Of course, the Pro-wrestling matches are in the styles I like myself and—"

"Shit! There is absolutely no need to listen to this guy talking!"

Inaba yelled.

"Get out! Pro-wrestling otaku!"

Following that, Nagase hollered.

"Wait, calm down! You always say that it's unnecessary and are always against it, but this time, it's completely for people who are not familiar with—"

"It's pointless if the content itself hasn't changed!"

Inaba shouted once more.

"And yet Taichi thinks that's fine!"

On top of that, Nagase also shouted again.

"That's why, hang on. Certainly, advanced content such as 'Only if the first wrestlers can precisely set up the Boston Crab<sup>[1]</sup> will the main event special move battle be amazing'. will be included and—"

"Alright, I get it. Do whatever you like."

Inaba looked like she was absolutely annoyed but dealt with it.

"Come to think of it, what kind of article do you have, Inaba?"

Taichi said with a nuance, which exposed his thought that Inaba's idea would be amazing.

"Because it's a festival, I thought 'What can I do to kick things up a notch?'"

While talking, Inaba took out a photo.

As Taichi pondered the meaning of the phrase that he'd never heard from



Inaba before, he leaned forward and tried to look at the photo — At that moment he stiffened.

Speechless.

Dumbfounded.

Taichi froze without a sound.

Next to him, everyone except for Inaba was making an uproar.

The culprit for this chaos.

The photo showed two Yamaboshi High School Teachers were seen clasping hands in a café.

"H-How the hell did you get a hold of this?!"

It was like a real scoop from a weekly photo magazine. With some fear, Taichi asked.

"Fufufu, It's a SE-CR-ET."

As usual, Inaba was unfathomable today.

"Uh, well..... but wait. Disregarding how you even obtained this photo, there's no way we can publish this in a school newspaper, right?"

"Is this for real?!" "It doesn't look like they were together by accident?!" "Awesome!". Taking a sideways glance at Nagase, Kiriya, and Aoki, who were still cooing over the photo, Taichi continued asking.

"Anything can be done with a publication permit."

"It can't be that simple..... Well even if we are allowed to print it, can we even distribute this? If this is seen by the subjects themselves and the teachers, won't they immediately stop it?"

"Hmph, that small obstacle isn't going to be a problem for the five of us, right?"

—If it's the five of us.

"Why are you acting so sure of yourself.....? This almost certainly won't work. It will be over if we do that. There's no way this will end well."

As Taichi voiced his realistic concerns, Inaba made a somewhat serious expression.

"Of course, if we do it without thinking about the consequences, it would be difficult to complete and settle it peacefully without getting a single complaint against us. A normal person is only capable of normal things, so it may not work for them. However, we can do it. Why? That's because—"

Broadly grinning, with the sides of her mouth raised, Inaba haughtily folded her arms.

"—If the five of us are together, we are invincible. At least within this school."

Even with zero proof to back up her boast, Inaba declared with a confidence that inspired others to believe in her claim.

"That's that. Mission Start!"



It is only one week away from the Cultural Festival at Yamaboshi High School.

The sound of hammers hitting nails and the voices of a large number of singers could be heard. Aside from that, the chattering of many students hard at work caused the school to be surrounded by a cacophony of noise.

Within that, Taichi and gang proceeded with their plan for the CRC.

And now, Taichi, Nagase, and Inaba, went to meet the Cultural Research Club's adviser, Gotou Ryuuzen (A 25 year old physics teacher) in the staff room in order to get approval for their completed articles.

Getting the permission to publish the article was the first hurdle.

"Ohh, the CRC members who are in my class 1C. What's up? By the way, how's the class's café going?"

Gotou is the homeroom teacher of class 1C, which is Taichi, Nagase and Inaba's class. Inevitably, the three of them came to know him as the teacher who interacts the most with his students.



"As you should know, since our class president is reliably taking care of it, we're progressing too smoothly. And Gotou, like always, we would like you to scan through this 'CR News' and affix the seal so that we can distribute it legally."

Even though Gotou was really friendly to students, I'm not sure if Inaba's attitude would be accepted.

"Hey, Inaba. I've already told you to at least call me by my approved nickname, 'Go-san'. By leaving out the honorific, my teacher's dignity would..... hmm? Is that this time's work.....?"

The "CR News Cultural Festival Special Edition" caught Gotou's attention, distracting from defending his pride as a teacher.

There was a variety of opportunities to throw a one liner, but Taichi restrained himself.

"W-What is this one page with a huge photo? This is..... social studies's Tanaka-sensei ! And that's Hirata Ryouko-sensei, who meets the three important conditions of looks, style, personality, and has outstanding talent to boot! Those two had that kind of relationship!? I never knew they were dating!"

"Go-san. it's obvious that your description of Hirata-sensei doesn't come from your ability to judge colleagues."

As one would expect, Taichi butted in with his one liner.

"It doesn't look like they are officially dating yet."

Inaba said.

"Ahhh..... What..... That's great..... There's a huge age gap between Tanaka-sensei, who's well into middle age and the youthful and energetic Hirata-sensei, who's still in her early twenties, after all."

Gotou took a deep breath.

"But it seems like it's only a matter of time before they start dating."

"Ehhh. Isn't Tanaka-sensei just a quiet, unsociable person in love with Japanese history?! Just when I was worried about him still being single in his old age, he went ahead caught some big fish!"

Seeing Gotou grabbing his head with his hands, Inaba laughed secretly.

Inaba (student) was just playing around and Gotou (teacher) was being played.

"Aaaah, I've lost my will to work today. Tonight I'm going to go drinking."

"So, Go-san, could you use the seal and give us the permission to distribute 'CR News'?"

While fluttering the document, Nagase asked.

"If you want, stamp it yourself. Anyway if it's you guys, you probably didn't write anything you shouldn't have, hmph."

By one way or another, their relationship of trust has come to this.

"—We figured that you'd say that, so we did it already."

Nagase grinned and said.

".....That's a really weird thing to say so smoothly."

As expected, Taichi muttered to himself while feeling that there was a problem somewhere.

With that, the first obstacle, became nothing but a small hurdle thanks to Gotou's personality.

Just as Taichi, Nagase, and Inaba were looking for a printer, Kiriya and Aoki came to the Cultural Research Club's clubroom. Recently, Kiriya and Aoki had to put in a lot of effort to practice for their class's dance performance, so it was quite a while ago since the five of them gathered. With no delay, the "CR News Cultural Festival Special Edition" meeting started.

Taichi turned towards Inaba and spoke.

"As I thought, regarding this kind of scandalous scoop article, I would like to get the subjects' permission first."

"I'm saying, it's going to be fine. According to my research, they are completely love each other, but with their age gap and with Tanaka-sensei being a rigid, boring person, they haven't really decided yet. This article could



be a push in the right direction for the two of them. I think it won't be a problem..... Probably."

"Don't use 'probably'..... I've been thinking about it for a while now, but how did you end up with this information in your hands?"

"Haven't I been saying it already? It's a Se-cr-et. Ufufu."

"That's an amazingly villainous face, Inaba....."

The degree of change from her usual face was actually excessively frightening.

"Well, I'll trust Inaba on this."

Kiriyama opened her mouth.

"Let's quickly decide on how to distribute 'CR News'. If we don't have a scheme, we would probably be stopped in the middle of distributing, right?"

Kiriyama fanned herself using a desk pad, causing her long chestnut-colored hair to wave in the air.

"We did get permission, but Go-san only gave an OK based on his own judgment..... and he did it extremely arbitrarily."

After all, it was unthinkable that Gotou's status among the teachers was so high that everything would be fine with only his permission.

"That's a simple problem. In fact, I don't really see it as a problem."

Inaba was brimming with self confidence again.

"Do you have a good solution for this, Inaba?" Taichi asked.

With this level of confidence, she must have a suitable idea—

"We distribute it all at once, that's all."

—But it was surprisingly simple.

"Yeah, yeah. Without any complexities and with a straightforward effect, that's probably the best."

Nagase nodded, then leaned forward and continued talking.

"Ah, I was thinking, since we don't do this very often, we should aim to distribute them in a way with a big impact! How about scattering them from the

roof in a flashy way?"

"That's great! Nice Idea, Iori-chan. That's very festival-like! Wouldn't it be even better if we launch something like fireworks while scattering the articles?"

"Ohhh, not bad, Aoki! This will be a big event!

"Yay!" Aoki and Nagase exclaimed with unnecessarily high tension

"Because it will be the focus of attention, lots of people will look at it. Also, it won't take much time to distribute. It's just like killing two birds with one stone."

Kiriyama also looked like she was enthusiastic about it.

"Hmph, not bad, I think. But in this situation, we'll have to first consider if any refreshment booths nearby are using fire..... Moreover, we won't be able to throw everything out at once, so we'll need to decide on the exact number of copies to scatter, and we'll have to think about whether we should store the remaining copies somewhere or distribute them. Ahh, and we have to check in detail the condition of the wind on that day. Furthermore, if they are not all picked up, we'll have to go collect them by ourselves....."

Inaba confirmed the practical implementation of the plan.

"I can't tell if you're a reckless or logical person."

"What are you saying, Taichi? At the very least, I'm more logical than anyone else here."

Inaba doesn't seem to have one shred of a doubt.

"If we're throwing them off, ha! I've just thought of a brilliant idea!"

All of a sudden, Aoki stood up.

"What? I'll listen without expectations."

Kiriyama frowned with a slightly sultry expression<sup>[2]</sup>.

"No, no, it's okay to have some expectations, Yui! I'm in perfect form today! Why don't we do it when the people at the main stage are at the peak of their excitement, or in other words, right after the Cultural Festival's final highlight, the long-awaited Yamaboshi High School Beauty Contest? That's what I'm



saying!"

"..... That's actually a normal suggestion. I can't think of any comments for it."

"Why not?! Is it a terrible thing for me to be normal?!"

Nagase replied to Aoki's outburst.

"It's not terrible, but it's just somewhat wrong. Ah, your suggestion was pretty good though."

"What..... What can I even hope for..... Ah, I don't know anymore. Whatever."

He gave up quickly.

"In addition....."

Inaba cut in. After everyone's attention was on her, she continued.

"Wouldn't it be interesting if the beauty contest winner was a CRC member?"

"Ohhh," everyone cheered in response to Inaba's plan.

"That's good-but the problem is who can go on stage and take the victory....."

Nagase was interrupted by Inaba.

"That would obviously be you, Iori. I'm not being sarcastic here. I seriously believe that you can do it."

"Ehh, I do accept that I am cute, but can I really take first place?"

"So you admit that you're cute," Taichi muttered.

What a frank girl. Certainly this isn't a mistake.

Kiriyama piped up.

"It'll be fine, Iori. The Beauty Pageant is structured such that contestants are separated by their school year. And looking at it objectively, you can't say that there's a first year student cuter than Iori. My judgment of cute kids is good, so don't worry."

"What's with Kiriyama saying that in such a proud way....."

Once again, Taichi whispered.

"Actually, both Inaba and Yui have the potential to win the contest, right?"

"Well, I'm certainly in the category of beautiful people, I think."

"I'm also pretty cute, I guess."

Inaba and Kiriya said.

Basically, the CRC's Girl Squad is strangely not humble about such matters.

"By the way, for me, Yui is the number one — doha?!"

Aoki's shoulder was hit by Inaba's bursts of punches.

"Shut up! Ah~ anyway, we won't go wrong if Iori enters the pageant. Tsk, well, throw in the trump card! Say it, Taichi!"

"Huh? I..... What can I say?"

Taichi was flustered at suddenly being pointed out.

"If you say something, I have a feeling it will go somewhat well!"

Inaba encouraged as she left the job to him.

"Even if you say that..... But, well, I suppose that Nagase's appearance can win the Beauty Pageant."

For the time being, Taichi just said whatever he thought of.

"That's..... Taichi thinks that I'm very cute..... would that be a good interpretation?"

Nagase's sincere eyes peeked at Taichi's direction.

"Oh, well, it's just as you said."

Taichi nodded.

After digesting that response with a few seconds of silence, Nagase presented a smile that made Taichi's heart melt.

It was a shockingly attractive smile.

"What? That's Strange. After Taichi said it, I felt like I wanted to do it. Alright, let's go! I'll win the contest and then we'll distribute 'CR News' in a really flashy manner!"

Nagase tightened her fist and announced in a loud voice.

"Yeah, that's it! Nagase-chan, fight!"

"The participants are free to choose the clothing for the beauty pageant, right?! Wow, I wonder what should I put on you~. Ufufu, in my name, I will make you~~~~~ the cutest one!"

Aoki and Kiriyaama jubilantly said.

Beside them, Inaba arrogantly turned to look at Taichi, with a face that seemed to say, "See, exactly how I said it would go."

"That was unexpected."

Taichi said. Inaba snorted and laughed scornfully.

"Is that so? ..... Anyway, what we have to prepare now are daytime fireworks as huge and showy as possible, and....."

Inaba pulled the laptop in front of her closer and started typing away.

"Let's do our best for the Cultural Festival, Taichi! We have to make it a success!"

With a frown on her face, Nagase forcefully stuck out her right fist at Taichi.

*—What can I do as a person in this five-man group?*

*Even though I don't understand it myself, it isn't especially important.*

*But, even if it is, I'll do what I can.*

".....Yeah! if we're doing it, let's make this a success for sure."

Taichi bumped his right fist with Nagase's.



The day of the Cultural Festival arrived.

The skies are clear with a gentle breeze. It was the ideal weather for Taichi and the CRC's plan.



Thanks to the weather, many people who weren't from the school came to visit. The turnout was superb, and the school was surrounded by a lively atmosphere.

A little past noon, Taichi went towards the main stage with Inaba, Kiriyaama, and Aoki.

The cultural festival was a complete success. While looking away and walking, one would quickly bump into someone else.

Now, the event on the main stage would account for the success or failure of "CR News Cultural Festival Special Edition Distribution Operation!" (Named by Inaba). The appeal time of the Beauty Pageant (First Year Division) was underway.

Even if Nagase was eliminated, the operation would not become impossible to conduct. A backup plan had been prepared for that situation.

However, since Taichi and the others went on with the plan based on the assumption that Nagase would come out victorious, they would want to avoid sudden changes if possible.

Above all, they wanted to achieve a complete success.

"I've checked out the contestants for the first years, and they can be all said to be fairly cute, but there isn't anyone who comes close to Iori."

Kiriyaama said while holding some Takoyaki she had bought from a refreshment booth. Because of the dance performance in her class today, she had tied her chestnut hair back.

On the stage, the female contestants were asked various questions by the host.

The host had been infected by the mood and was asking suggestive questions, causing the audience to erupt in excitement..... However, asking for the three sizes was overdoing it a..... ah, I've been hit.

"That's good!" "Do more!" Some hoots flew in from outfield.

It was as if the grounds were being heated up with all the hype.

"I didn't help, but the outfit's right on the mark, right?"

Inaba asked KiriYama.

"Hafu..... Hot! Isn't, isn't this a bit too hot, this Takoyaki?!"

"Eh? Really? I'll try to eat one. Ok, ahh."

"Who'd let you eat it, you pervert bastard."

KiriYama showered jeers at Aoki, who was looking quite stupid with his mouth wide open.

Those two never change.

"Ummm, you were asking about the outfit, right? Of course it's perfect! I was in a dilemma, but then I decided to make it completely to my liking!"

"Hey" interrupted Taichi.

"I wanted her to wear that once~. It's very cute so expect the best. Ah, remember to flatter her by saying "It's cute it's cute", so that it'll probably be easy to make her do cosplay from now on."

"Who's benefiting from this?" said Taichi as he made an interjection once again.

"Mainly me, so?"

Looking as if it was obvious, KiriYama (love cute things) said.

"She'll be everyone's eye candy, so why not? Ah~, really, cute is good. If it's about the thing I want to become, then I want to try and become lori. If that happens, I'll be able to wear all sorts of costumes..... if I can. Yeah, as I thought, cuteness is justice. Cuteness is the best! !! Love! Cute! Hafu..... it's hot! It's too hot!"

Even if you leave KiriYama alone, she can become somewhat of an interesting person all on her own.

"And, ah! Inaba, why are you eating my Takoyaki without asking!?"

".....Hm. If there's one thing I understand, it's that you're a complete cat's tongue<sup>[3]</sup>!"

With a snap, Inaba pointed at KiriYama using her toothpick.

"Kukuku, Inaba-chan, there's some seaweed stuck on a weird spot in the front of your teeth..... dohha?! Was there a need to hit me?! I was helping you, wasn't I?!"

"Being talked to like that by Aoki kind of makes me lose pride as a human being."

"That's probably the worst abuse I've suffered ever..... Gah."

They weren't paying much attention to the stage.

"—san, thank you very much~. And moving on, entry number four~"

"Oh, isn't Iori next?"

Aoki raised his voice.

"Eh? Already number four? Ummm, camera, camera..... this Takoyaki is in the way!"

"Why did you buy it then....."

After delivering his one liner to the panicking Kiriyama, Taichi focused on the stage once again.

Wrapped in a yukata that can be perfectly described as elegant, a girl walked in from the wing of the stage.

That yukata, which was a pale peach color with distinct flower patterns, was neither too flashy nor extremely mature. It had a tinge that seemed to warm the heart and soul.

The girl wearing it had skin that was white like transparent snow. With the pink of the yukata, it was exactly like cherry blossom petals falling onto fresh snow.

Even from far away, it was possible to make out her huge, beautiful, double-eyelid eyes, which was the main feature of her face.

The girl, who had medium-length black hair with the softness and smoothness of silk threads and was wearing a shocking crimson ribbon in her hair (on Yui's insistence), stood in the center of the stage.

With a smile that penetrated everyone's hearts and caused them to smile



instinctively, she bent her head slightly to the side.

And—

"Wowwwwwwwwwwwwwww!"

The crowd's cheer was like a rumble from the ground.

At the center of the stage, showered by the waves of over-whelming cheers was, unequivocally, Nagase Iori.

Taichi, being charmed by her appearance, was speechless.

"Ohhh, I knew that Iori-chan was cute! But was she this cute?!"

Aoki exclaimed, unable to hide his excitement.

"Fu, that's the extent of my coordinating abilities. The hair took quite a bit of time..... Well, it was really almost all thanks to her natural appearance."

Kiriyama ecstatically turned her camera towards the stage.

"There's still the remaining contenders left and the voting after that but..... it's a victory, I think."

Inaba may have quickly declared victory even with all the unknown factors, but this time, it didn't look like she was mistaken, Taichi thought.



Taichi was running down the hallway.

Of course, he was fully aware that he was not supposed to, but even so, he did it anyway.

Taichi earnestly dashed down the bustling hallway at a speed that just missed the standard for dangerous.

On Taichi's left and right, Aoki and Kiriyama were also running like him. By the way, those two are still in the outfit for their own class's dance performance.

The "CR News Cultural Festival Special Edition Distribution Operation!" had

been progressing smoothly, but it was now meeting the first crisis.

If things stay as it is, the Beauty Pageant Results Announcement would commence, in other words we probably might not make it at the planned time to throw the "CRC News Cultural Festival Special Edition".

"Why were you two so late?! Didn't you say that you had enough time?!"

Taichi asked Kiriya and Aoki.

"Cou.....couldn't believe, that there was..... an..... encore....."

Since he was taking part in a ferocious spring after dancing for two rounds, Aoki's breath had become ragged.

"By..... by the..... way..... Taichi..... wasn't your duty..... supposed to end a bit earlier.....?"

"It was, but someone really wanted to switch duties....."

Taichi replied and Kiriya let out an ostentatious sigh.

"Aah. Taichi's helping others syndrome has appeared again."

One would expect Kiriya to be at least as athletic as Aoki, but Kiriya wasn't even breaking a sweat. As one would expect from someone with top class physical strength in the school. Her vigorous fundamental strength as a stalwart in the field of middle school girls' karate was still present, even though she had quit karate a while ago.

One, two, three suspicious shadows appeared in front of Taichi's group.

They were three well-built boys who looked liked they played rugby(By the way, they were in aprons).

The three people who looked just like gate keepers blocked our passage through the corridor.

"Hey, aren't you guys hungry?" "Yeah, you're hungry right!" "That is to say, we welcome the three valued customers to our store!"

With unpleasantly business-like smiles on their faces, the three boys rattled off their lines in succession.

"Our shop has a Triumph Set and it's a huge bargain!" "Let's go with that,

then!" "That is to say, three orders of the Triumph coming right up!"

"Wh-What?"

Confused, Taichi stumbled and stopped.

Like him, KiriYama and Aoki also stopped.

"Is this the rumored sales technique to unscrupulously push off the remaining stock in one clean sweep just before the end of the Cultural Festival? ..... Since many clubs have set up refreshment booths, the competition is intense and I've heard that this kind of thing is quite common..... but it's problematic for us to experience it here."

KiriYama explained the sales tactic to us with an unusual look of admiration.

While she was talking, the group of three muscular males (in aprons) slowly sidled up to us.

*It looks like they won't let us pass. However, backtracking and taking another route would cost us a huge loss in time.*

*In that case.*

*The thing I can do right now.*

"I'll become the sacrifice here. You two go ahead, I'll catch up afterwards"

"Taichi. I'm just asking to make sure, but what are you planning to do by becoming the sacrifice?"

KiriYama's voice sounded angry.

"I'll eat the Triumph Sets in front of those three..... If I do that, I'll probably help them as well.

"Haa..... You sure are a simple-minded idiot. Come on, why do you have to be so soft-hearted all the time?! What were you thinking when you said, 'I'll help them as well'?"

KiriYama's looked exasperated. I'm somehow a little apologetic for that.

"Whatever. Anyways, that's not good! We already don't have Iori, so we don't have enough manpower, and we don't have time."



"Well, then what should we do....."

"I'll be the decoy and lure them in. During that time, escape from the side. Got it?"

"But..... But doing that..... Yui!"

Of course, Aoki would say that.

"Who do you think I am? Well then..... let's go!"

Without waiting for Taichi and Aoki's rebuttal, Kiriyaama charged at the boys. The size difference between the small-statured Kiriyaama and the muscular boys looked disastrous.

"Shit..... Taichi. Haa..... haa..... We have to go!"

Taichi could only continue after the running Aoki. They couldn't afford to waste Kiriyaama's actions.

"Hey, you~" "Where are you going in such a hurry?" "The entrance is this way~"

Since Kiriyaama had rushed forward in such a flashy manner, the boys' attention were drawn on her.

And then at that moment, Taichi and Aoki escaped through the flanks of the three muscular boys.

"What?! "Oh no!" "She was a decoy?!"

The apron-wearing boys hurried to catch them, but they were too late.

For one moment, Taichi glimpsed in Kiriyaama's direction. She looked a little afraid, but as her eyes glared intently at her opponents, they radiated a burning fighting spirit.

There was nothing to do except to believe in Kiriyaama. Her instincts from the time when she still did karate had probably not dulled yet, but—

"A-Anyway, even over here..... alright, caught her!"

Taichi couldn't believe his ears.

Those were the worst words.

Kiriyama had been caught.

Taichi quickly braked and turned around—

"Wha.....! A-Afterimage!?"

.....This time for sure, Taichi couldn't believe his ears. It was his first experience doubting his hearing ability to such an extent.

"Isn't that surpassing the limits of humans?!"

The group of three boys (in aprons), who were probably not bad people in one way or another, were just saying that to deal with their surprise of getting escaped from..... Believing that, Taichi hurried forward.

Kiriyama, who had caught up in the blink of an eye, lined up next to Taichi.

Then she grinned and stuck her thumb up.

"Cool! Yui! I've fallen for you again!"

Aoki shouted. It seems like he's blown off all of his lethargy.

*From today, I'll always remember that Kiriyama has frightfully high potential.*



Since there were some delays in the proceedings of the beauty pageant, the crisis of not making it to the results announcement was averted. The next step was to help Inaba carry the "CR News" from the classroom one floor below the rooftop, and prepare for the launch of the daytime fireworks..... that was supposed to be all.

But on the roof, another emergency situation worse than the one before had visited the Cultural Research Club.

"Wh-What are you saying? This is?"

Inaba answered Taichi in a quiet voice.

".....I applied to a Cultural Festival Committee member to 'launch a few fireworks and throw a few pieces of paper on the roof', and because we're

using fireworks, they've asked a teacher to supervise us..... Good grief, tell us in advance, dammit."

Inaba detestably spat. In her line of vision was, of all people, the main subject of this time's scoop photo, social studies teacher Tanaka.

Tanaka, like always, had a sour displeased look, which seemed as if he wanted to ask, "You got a problem with that?" Now, he was silently looking at Aoki and Kiriya who were checking the fireworks near the roof.

"It looks like the setting of the fireworks are done but in this situation, preparing to scatter the 'CR News'.....is difficult, as I thought."

Tanaka definitely wouldn't allow us to scatter the "CR News" which has a photo of him and a female co-worker and teacher secretly meeting.

"Aah, its extremely likely that he'd say 'Don't distribute those!'. This plan might even have to be cancelled here."

Inaba, who was always filled with self-confidence, or rather, hubris, looked down with a grave expression on her face.

"You're joking....."

Taichi's voice slipped out, as Inaba's state caused him to be unable to hide his agitation.

"Can I accept such a thing? Yes or no?"

In a complete change, Inaba had an unpleasantly full smile on her face.

".....No, I think. No doubt."

*I want to laugh at myself after thinking that Inaba would give up even once.*

*Once she decides on doing something, she would follow through, by hook or by crook.*

*That's the type of person Inaba is.*

"Do you have a plan?"

"Of course, don't you think? Something that won't be so suspicious, and won't be so bad. I have a plan to make Tanaka leave this place for a while."



".....I'm kind of curious about the extent of 'won't be so'."

Wishing for Inaba get into her straightforward mode, Taichi murmured.

"However, for this plan, everyone's cooperation will be needed..... and there's also certain risks....."

Inaba said. Taichi immediately responded.

"Of course we'll cooperate as much as you want. As for the risks, everyone trusts that you'll do something about them."

Taichi reassuringly said. Inaba looked at him and instantly became certain.

Inaba turned her head down by a few degrees and smiled. It was a somewhat gentle smile that carried a slightly different atmosphere.

"Alright! That's it..... But even so, there's nothing for you to do."

".....Nothing at all?"

Didn't he look foolish after putting in so much enthusiasm?

"Well, you can do some odd jobs, I guess. Call Yui and Aoki to come. Then, casually move the water buckets for extinguishing fire to the place that I'll tell you. I'll leave it up to you, odd jobs-kun."

"So I'm just doing chores....."

While complaining, Taichi went according to Inaba's directions.

During that time, Kiriya and Aoki, who had been summoned to Inaba, were taught a suspicious plan. Kiriya quickly shook her head upon hearing Inaba's words.

However, Inaba whispered something into Kiriya's ear, and immediately after Inaba's mouth was closed, Kiriya nodded excitedly.

She doesn't want to make enemies, Taichi seriously thought.

Bang. Inaba hit something by the side of her hips.

That seemed to be the signal. Kiriya and Aoki obliquely moved to gain some distance.

What am I to do? Taichi looked at Inaba to confirm, and with a finger, she

ordered Taichi to "standby where he was". (That's how Taichi interpreted it)

And then, the sound of Inaba hitting something rang out again.

And then,

"Ah! It's almost time, we must bring the papers here!"

Kiriyama spoke (in a surprising monotone) and ran out.

Of course Taichi's focus moved towards Kiriyama. In the corner of his eye, he could make out Tanaka likewise turning to look at her.

Next was Aoki.

"Ah! I forgot my Chakaman<sup>[4]</sup>!"

Saying something like that, he dashed out.

*How on earth would it develop into Tanaka leaving this room?*

With sweaty hands, Taichi watched over the fate of this situation.

And then, in front of his eyes, the plan unfolded. —*I can't believe my eyes.*

First, Aoki, who had supposedly run outside earlier, made his move.

"I tripped.....!"

With words that sounded like a lie, he took a grand fall.

Not understanding anything, Taichi winced and looked up. Isn't that Kiriyama plunging towards the falling Aoki?

"Uh, ah, be careful!"

Kiriyama shouted. Almost trampling on Aoki, she jumped.

Making use of her tension in her legs, Kiriyama easily leapt over Aoki, but it was impossible to stop her momentum.

"Wah, toh, toh, toh....."

Kiriyama stumbled a few steps while landing.

In front of her path was the water bucket that Taichi had moved earlier.

..... The penny dropped.

However, it was hard to believe that this foolish plan could actually be carried out in reality. Taichi's chest filled with hope and anxiety as he waited for the outcome.

And then-

"Tanaka-sensei! get out of the way! It's dangerous..... goooooo!"

Kiriyama, who had said clearly something she shouldn't have in the middle of that shout, kicked the bucket filled with water.

*This was foolish in so many ways!*

Kiriyama's ferocious kick hit the bucket and the water inside rose with it.

"Whaaaaattt?!"

As if it was planned, the bucket did not directly hit Tanaka, but only the water showered onto him with a splash.

This plan was audacious to the extreme.

"Sensei, are you alright?! This is pretty serious..... You should go change! Do you have something to change into?"

With a hurried bearing, Inaba rushed over to Tanaka.

"Co, Cold.....! .....C-Change? Ah, I have something but..... But before that, I can't help but think that this is deliberately....."

"Ahh, It was such an unfortunate accident! Anyway, it's better if you hurry and go change!"

The last line was extremely coercive. Inaba pushed Tanka out of the rooftop area.

After Inaba and Tanaka had left, Taichi, Kiriyama, and Aoki continued to look at closed door speechlessly.

A few moments passed before the door opened.

And then, Inaba, whose face could only be seen, spoke.

"Hurry up and prepare! We've got no time!"

Taichi worriedly wondered if there were going to be any problems afterwards.

After that, time passed in the blink of an eye.

First, the four people retrieved the "CR News" and set them so that it was possible to immediately throw them down.

While listening to the progress of the beauty pageant from the speakers, each of them set up two daytime fireworks to be ready for launch.

In the middle of their work, they heard some sounds from the speakers.

"—and for the first year division, Miss Yamaboshi is..... entry number four! Class 1C, Nagase Iori! Okaaaay! That's what I thought, too~!"

It was exactly what they had expected.

Nevertheless, the host sure was getting into the swing of it.

The second and third year division announcement continued smoothly.

Thanks to the overly enthusiastic host dragging on the announcements and tirelessly taking up time, the CRC managed to complete the preparations with time to spare.

But this time, Tanaka, who had finished changing, returned. The members were stuck with worrying and awkwardly waiting for time to pass.

When the host finally went into the conclusion, "Can I say a few words?" a familiar voice flowed from the speakers.

Cheers and applause broke out.

"Thank you! I am this year's first year division Miss Yamaboshi, Nagase Iori! Umm, as a matter of fact, I am in the club called Cultural Research Club. And the Cultural Research Club has something to present for this time's Cultural Festival. Without any ado..... please look up!"

That was the signal. The remaining four members of the Cultural Research Club lit the fireworks.

Shooo! Leaving behind the sound of discharge, the fireworks launched.

Colorful smoke soared high into the sky.

The sound of the explosion reverberated.



The unexpected amount of smoke and the loud noise surprised the four members of the Cultural Research Club.

However, even in their state of surprise, under Inaba's orders, the members of the Cultural Research Club scattered the "CR News Cultural Festival Special Edition" down the roof.

The newspaper that they chose to write themselves fluttered and danced in the sky.

With the photo of the secret meeting between teachers on one side, the papers swooped down towards the clamoring crowd.

The cheering became louder.

The commotion increased.

"This is our 'CR News'! Please have a read~!"

With Nagase's last words, Taichi and the others had finished all they can do.

All they could do now was to watch the ripples from the thrown stone<sup>[5]</sup>.

The result still couldn't be seen, but Taichi noticed that he was laughing.

Even in this situation, laughs continued to pour out.

Looking to the side, Inaba, Kiriya, and Aoki were also laughing.

Clapping their hands, they continued their loud, meaningless, stupid laughs.

And a little further away, Nagase was also laughing on the ground.

With her mouth wide open and a sunny, smiling face, Nagase was awkwardly jumping up and down.

They could hear the sounds from the sports field carried by the wind.

The noise of a ruckus,

The sounds of cheering,

The sound of screaming,

Some angry voices,

Some strange voices,

Reached our ears one after another.

The sounds formed a stimulation that brought us back into reality. The inexhaustible laughter faded into nothingness.

From the speakers, a voice can be heard.

"What the heck?! Is this article true?! This year's Miss Yamaboshi belongs to that club, after all! Eh? 'That's not related?' Heck if I know!"

It looks like the announcer is really arguing with the audience.

"You're saying that they don't look like their dating? So you think they're continuing some half-assed relationship? What are you, a middle school student! Eh? 'Hirata-sensei is someone I admire?', you say? I also kinda do, damn it!"

Seems like he's forgotten his role as host.

"Eh? What is it this time? 'How about we make it clear if they're dating or not'? That's what I was thinking, yeah? ..... So, how about asking them to make it black and white, right here, right now! How about it, dear guests!"

An unbelievably thunderous cheer erupted.



"Yeah yeah. Thanks for the noise..... Would the people concerned come up

on stage! No..... here's a better plan, how about dragging them along onto the stage at the night festival<sup>[6]</sup>, everyone! Alright, secure Hirata-sensei and Tanaka-sensei! Hurry with the preparations for the campfire! Everyone, goooooo!"

With a ground-rumbling cheer, the students scattered.

Thanks to the excitable host and the power of the audience exposed by the unique festival atmosphere, an extra stage, which Taichi and the others did not expect, had been prepared.

.....As one would expect, this has become a too big of a event.



The sun set and the night festival began.

The sinking sun's faint light and the burning red of the campfire lit up the sports field. Headed by the passionate host, the energy of the excited crowd showed no signs of weakening. Now, the teachers were preparing for an unprecedented public confession in front of the entire student body plus the alpha leading them.

At first, the two in question were resistant to the idea(especially Tanaka). However, the majority of the teachers also said "Can't help that it's become so huge! Just do it! See this to the end!" and sided with the students, so the two subjects didn't have a choice.

In the end, they made such an embarrassing confession that anyone would blush from hearing it. With that, a teacher couple officially recognized by the school had been created, and the event turned out to have a happy ending.

All that was left to be worried about was how the two teachers would face their classes from now on.

Immediately after the public confession, Taichi was jostled around by his restless classmates, who asked questions like "How did you guys do it!", but for now, all was calm.



It seems that many boys had thoughts like "If I ride on the waves of this atmosphere..... I feel like it'll work" and "Ah, if I miss this chance, when will I ever get the next one?" and made advances on the people they liked.

Even when they were hit on in such an excellently feverish atmosphere, the girls weren't foolish. Not counting those that they had prospects for, the girls probably rejected everyone completely and beautifully.

It seems like there would be a frightening ambience in the classrooms at the beginning of the next week.

Inaba is walked over alone from the direction of the school building.

Taichi immediately went over to her and called out.

"Hey, Inaba. Where are you going? It was so difficult being peppered with questions like 'Where did you get your hands on that photo?'"

"Ah— Yes, yes, thanks for your hard work. I was also cleaning some loose ends from this incident."

"Loose ends? Did something happen?"

Taichi asked. Inaba's face clearly told Taichi that she was thinking "Is this guy stupid or what?".

"Seriously, do you think that it's okay to secretly take a photo of teachers and distribute them to the entire student body without explaining and justifying it to the subjects themselves? Are you stupid? Wait, you are stupid."

Inaba asserted.

Because that was exactly the case, Taichi could not offer a rebuttal.

"I..... I'm sorry."

He honestly apologized.

"Hmph. Well, since I've expertly explained away the situation, you don't need to worry."

"What on earth did you do to smooth out this situation?"

He had certainly wanted to accompany her to the negotiation.

"In any case, how did you get your hands on that..... I'll stop asking about that. Why did you decide to use that for the article? Didn't you know that it would become a serious mess in many ways?"

Since he had been curious about it from the beginning, Taichi asked. If he had to decide, he would expect Inaba to be the type of person who does her best to avoid putting in unnecessary effort.

After a little while, Inaba started talking.

"That's because, I understand that those two have mutual feelings for each other. They were waiting for a trigger, those two. And, if I give that indecisive middle-aged man a push from the back, they would owe me quite a big favor. Well, whether I can get them to think that way depends on my conversation skills during my explanation."

Inaba broadly grinned and laughed.

"Moving on, did you know that Tanaka's greatly involved in the budget compilation of each club? If we could work that into an article, we can probably secure a sizable amount for next year's budget, right? Hehhehheh."

"Are you the devil?"

*As I thought, I couldn't help but be curious about Inaba's sources of information.*

"But in the end, it all turned out to be for Inaba's benefit."

*That's so like her,* Taichi thought and laughed a little.

Seeming to not have heard Taichi's monologue, Inaba absent-mindedly murmured.

".....Well, I simply wanted to do something stupid with you guys, I suppose. If I wanted to only get hold of the funds, then there are other, better ways to do it."

Those words were a little different from Taichi's image of Inaba.

"Heh, so Inaba also thinks that way?"

Taichi had never thought that the rationalist Inaba would ever say something

like, "I simply wanted to do something stupid".

Furthermore, she also said that she wanted to do it with us, and Taichi felt somewhat happy with that. Without thinking, he grinned.

In response, Inaba's face became red.

"Hey, why the hell are you grinning! Don't laugh! Gross!"

"What? Are you embarrassed?"

"I AM NOT EMBARRASSED!"

Finding Inaba's strange irritation at such a trivial matter to be funny, Taichi wanted to laugh excessively.

"I told you to stop smiling! Ahhhh~~~~ Shit, when talking to Taichi, we somehow chat about unnecessary things."

Inaba pouted and messily grabbed her hair.

".....Hmm? Taichi. Nagase's calling you from over there, you should get going already. Look! Hehe."

Taichi turned around and could see Nagase, who had changed from a yukata to her uniform. While waving her hand swiftly in the air, she did a slow jog towards us.

"Well, the bug getting in the way shall disappear."

It's better if we're all together, though. Inaba went off, for some reason leaving behind those words.

Nagase arrived in front of Taichi's eyes.

"Hey, sorry. I've just been confessed to by lots of people."

"You can say something like that so smoothly?! By the way, was it the guys from class?!"

He was quite surprised.

"There were some from our class and some from elsewhere."

".....So, what did you do?"

Taichi nervously asked.

"I kept calm and rejected them all!"

"The taste of your wording was too light! And don't use something like 'keep calm'! "

While retorting, Taichi felt relieved.

*.....Huh? Why am I relieved, I wonder.*

"Well, I'm grateful that they told me they like me and it's not like I dislike those people, but I can't really care about that kind of thing, or perhaps I can't do that sort of thing....."

Her attitude up till now had been crisp, but now it completely changed. Nagase spoke with a voice that seemed to be shaking with sorrow.

Taichi was unable to respond well to that abrupt change.

However, in the middle of thinking, Nagase returned to her excited self.

"More importantly, weren't we super awesome today?! We surprised such a huge crowd, realized a love story, and this aftermath is wonderful! It's like a convention where people are confessing left, right and center! Well, this will..... become a legend!"

Nagase laughed while making a peace sign.

"Ah, that's true. I was moved a bit."

I certainly didn't think that we would be able to move this many people, influence something, and not to mention change something completely.

"We were able to do it for the first time because it was the five of us."

Looking happy from the bottom of the heart, Nagase said.

"That's true..... I would honestly want to say that, but I didn't participate much....."

"Certainly, there's no need to talk about Inaba, Aoki gave a nice idea, I also worked hard for the beauty pageant, and I heard that Yui participated actively today. Compared to that, Taichi especially didn't do anything right? Exactly being only a combatant A<sup>[7]</sup>!"

"Guha?!"

*Even though I agree with it, but hearing someone else frankly saying it caused me to take a huge amount of damage.*

Seeing Taichi act heavily injured and grabbing his chest, Nagase giggled and laughed like she was having fun, and then spoke.

"But, as expected, I think Taichi is the most necessary person among the five of us ."

*—A necessary person.*

Looking straight with her frightfully beautiful eyes, Nagase continued.

"There are certainly case where it isn't true, but the person who looks like he isn't doing anything often carries out the most important role in the organization, right?"

"Is that..... so?"

"There are cases when it isn't, though."

".....Do you want to comfort me or not?"

Ahaha, laughed Nagase as she presented a smile brighter than the campfire.

"At the very least, I needed Taichi to be here for me to be able to do it. If Taichi wasn't here, I wouldn't like it, I..... think? Was that a little awkward just now? Hm?"

Nagase cocked her head to the side in doubt.

"Anyways, if one of the members is absent or swapped for someone else, we definitely wouldn't get a completely identical conclusion, right? Even if it's an extremely small difference. In the end, there is meaning for someone to be where he is, I believe."

"Nagase can be deep sometimes."

Taichi said with honestly admiration.

".....Ha! Did you just call me deep?! That's right, today is a festival. Anyways, let's go find Inaban, Yui, and Aoki! We've got to hurry up and launch the CRC!"

As Taichi was grumbling, "What do you mean by launch", Nagase held Taichi's arm and ran off at her own pace.



Entrusting his right arm to be dragged by the warm and soft hand, Taichi also started running.

They ran through the crowd filled with smiles and cut through the evening wind.

*Some of those smiles were likely caused by us.*

With that thought, Taichi laughed and joined the smiling group as one of them.

*I don't know if it's true.*

*But just today, I could pretend that I'm drunk with the festival atmosphere and try to believe the claim that I'm the most needed person.* Taichi thought to himself.

## Translation Notes

1. ↑ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boston\\_crab](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boston_crab)
2. ↑ In this context, I believe Kiriyama looks bored, and perhaps she's pouting.
3. ↑ A Japanese expression for someone who can't eat or drink very hot things.
4. ↑ A brand of rechargeable lighter
5. ↑ I believe it refers to a stone thrown into a pond, although it wasn't explicitly stated in the text.
6. ↑ Held on the last day of the night of the main festival, the night festival usually includes bonfire and dancing.
7. ↑ Refers to Combat Service Support, meaning that Taichi only supported from the backlines

# Kiriyama Yui's First Time Experience



Two weeks had passed since the personality exchange phenomenon stopped,

and it was supposed to be a routine morning for KiriYama Yui.

She woke up from bed (Woke up before the alarm clock started ringing).

Just to be sure, she checked that she hadn't swapped personalities with someone (Even though there was no need for doing that anymore, she still did so).

She went to the toilet (Completely had nothing to do with constipation).

She washed her face and brushed her teeth (She applied lotion on her face and used dental rinse on her teeth).

She ate breakfast (Toast, salad, and two bottles of milk).

She got changed (Thanks to changing her shampoo, the chestnut-colored long hair, which she prides herself on, felt softer than usual)

She left home.

She thought that it would be nice if today was a normal day, and believed that it would probably be the case.

However, that expectation was shattered immediately when she went to school.

A light blue postcard-sized envelope had been placed inside her shoe locker.

After staring at the envelope that was leaning on her indoor shoes, Yui closed the shoe locker.

"M-My eyes are playing tricks on me, right..... F-For sure, that's definitely it."

While grumbling quietly to herself, Yui opened the shoe locker again.

As expected, the light blue envelope was still there.

A deformed white cloud and a small bird were drawn on it, making it really cute.

Thump thump.

The sound of the heart was loud in her ears.

Shoe locker, a letter, and the contents would be as expected..... but wait. In these current times, is this kind of old-fashioned thing still done? It would be fine if a girl did it, but a guy? I'm quite uncomfortable, no, I'm really uncomfortable about this. Well, what other content could be in this letter? But there's e-mail, so what could he only tell me by letter—

"Morning, Yui."

"Uwah, wh-what!"

Yui grabbed the letter with godlike speed and stuffed it into her bag.

Looking over, it was the startled face of Yui's best friend in her class.

"M-Morning, Yukina."

".....Morning. What's with that weird reaction and loud voice early in the morning? You're drawing so much attention."

"Ah, errr..... Sorry."

"Whatever. And what did you just put in your bag—"

"Nothing! Nothing! Not at all!"

Yui was trembling and shaking her head.

"Yes yes, you did put something, right?"

"Eh, like I said, you're wrong."

"If you're going to say that I'm wrong, at least be a little better at telling a lie."

With a smart remark like in a two-person comedy act, Yukina hit Yui's chest with a snap.

"Hah, it's okay to be pure but, Onee-san is concerned about your future. I'm afraid that you'll be deceived by a bad man someday."

That's not true..... started Yui, but she abruptly stopped and chewed her words.

"Sorry, sorry. Don't sulk. You don't have to show me if you don't want to."

"I'm not sulking!"

"Ah~ every single thing about you really is cute. Come on, shall we quickly go



to the classroom?"

"Ah, b-before that, I have to go to-"

"What do you have to do so early in the morning?" asked the doubtful Yukina. Yui shook her off and went to the area behind the east side of the school building, where she could be alone for now.

The toilet would have been fine too, but somehow she didn't like the idea.

The reason was the atmosphere.

Yui once again stared fixedly at the light blue envelope.

*Could this be 'that'? Impossible.* As her mind went around in confused circles, her body became hotter.

Turning it over, she noticed a red heart seal.

*Already, no matter how you see it, it's a love le..... No, no, that's wrong. It hasn't been confirmed yet.*

Calm down. There's a chance that I'm jumping to the wrong conclusion. Yui warned herself and took two deep breaths.

"Well, anyway, I wouldn't know if I don't try opening it, right?"

Yui dishearteningly whispered to herself and peeled off the seal.

Without missing a beat, she hummed a tune as she removed the contents of the envelope. A piece of stationary paper was inside.

"Ugh, .....nervous....."

Contracting her eyes, she immediately opened the piece of stationary paper and scanned the first line.

*"To Kiriya-san"*

The possibility of it being mistakenly placed into her locker disappeared. It was definitely addressed to herself.

Next was the question of what kinds of words there were dancing<sup>[1]</sup> in the letter. While suppressing her increasing pulse, Yui moved her eyes to the next line. *Even if it's 'that', there's no way the main point will be written so suddenly. It would probably tell me to meet up somewhere.* Anyway, Yui slowly prepared herself mentally and read the—

*"I like you as a love interest. Starting today, for one week, I will be waiting outside the auditorium after club activities have finished. Please come when it's convenient. If you do not come, I will give up. Also, if you can, please do not speak of this to anyone."*

"I read it in one breath! It's completely a love letter! And a confession in a letter?! Are love letters supposed to be like this?!"

She slightly panicked.

Anyway, even though there was no point in doing so, I did some karate poses.

"Ha! Ya! Ei!"

*Alright, I calmed down a little..... Not really. I totally haven't calmed down.*

*I've been completely confessed to. Even when I've tried to avoid it. It's not like I've never been confessed to. Especially after becoming a high school student, Aoki or Aoki or Aoki has constantly been saying "I like you" and "I like you".*

*But still, I can't date a boy yet.*

*I can't declare that I've overcome my androphobia, so I can't do it.*

".....I have to reject him directly, right, even though he said that he likes me..... Ahh..... I'll feel so sorry for making it awkward, really."

*But if I don't even allow him to speak on equal grounds because "He's a guy" before actually meeting him, he probably won't accept it.*

*So I'll have to make some random lie,* Yui thought as she felt a sinking feeling.

"Ah, come to think of it, who sent this....."

Realizing that she hadn't checked, Yui read the name that was written on the bottom of the stationary paper.

*"Class 1C Oosawa Misaki"*

*Huh?*

*Did I see it wrongly?*

Yui looked at the clear sky, blinked a few times, and read the name again.

*"Class 1C Oosawa Misaki"*

*"Er..... a girl?"*

*It's not a boy but a girl.*

*I'm also a girl.*

*A love letter, from a girl to a girl.*

*".....A girl?!"*

Kiriyama Yui received her first love letter since she was born and was confessed to by the same gender for the first time in her life.

That was what happened on that autumn day.



After receiving a confession from a love letter, Kiriyama Yui was lost in thought throughout all the classes that day.

*Up until now, I haven't dated anyone.*

*Exactly around the age where I started to notice love, a certain thing caused me to feel the fear of men.*

*The period when I saw men as some other type of creature and getting close to them would make me feel sick lasted for one whole month.*

*After the overly strong reaction against men disappeared, I still couldn't stand being approached by a man at my worst. To me, men continued to be a scary existence that was different in nature.*

*Since I felt that way, there was no way I could like a man.*

*That is why I couldn't think about things related to "love".*

*When a friend tells me a love story, I would think, "I certainly can't relate to that" - and listen without much interest.*

*That is a different world where I can't touch.*

*However, now, various things have happened and my androphobia has faded. I was thinking that I could perhaps gradually move forward.*

*I've promised an important friend. That was for sure.*

*Then again, there's no way that this thing infecting my body for so many years could just disappear overnight. Even now, I haven't reached the stage where I can consider accepting the date or not.*

*Not quite.*

*But.*

*What if, the love interest turns out to be a "girl" ---- My own reason for not being able to "love" would be blown away completely.*

*What a paradigm shift.*

*No doubt the biggest discovery of the century.*

*Frankly speaking, if I can love, .....I wouldn't rule out trying to experience it.*

*But, but, Yui shook her head.*

*Love between the same gender is somewhat awkward. That won't work. It's weird. Love is something between opposite gender. That was obvious. ---- Was it? It probably wasn't a hard rule. In this day and age, there are a few countries where same sex marriage is accepted, after all. But it won't work. As I thought, it won't work. ---- But why wouldn't it? What's the reason? Nothing comes to mind. As I thought, you can't make a baby ..... But is that what we're looking for from a high school romance? No, that's not it. Then there's nothing wrong with another girl, right? But I'll be seen by everyone around. ---- Do I have to care about what everyone thinks? What's the purpose of "love"? In the first place what is "love" -----.*

*"---Yui, hey!"*

*"Ai, ow?!"*

Being hit on the head, Yui came to her senses. Before her eyes was Yukina, who had an exasperated look on her face.

"Homeroom is already over. Are you going to stare into space forever?"

"Eh? Ah..... it's true."

Everyone in the class was preparing to go home and the hasty ones had left already.

"Haah, did you really not notice? Your head was in the clouds the whole day."

"Uh, sorry."

"Whatever, You don't have to apologize. Come on, hurry and prepare to go home. Let go together for part of the way..... ah~. As I thought, I can't. Because my prospective lover-kun is here."

"Lo, lo, lo, lover, what.....!"

"Why are you always so confused? Well, see you tomorrow..... except that it's the Foundation Day<sup>[2]</sup>, so there's a break. See you the day after tomorrow, then. Don't get it wrong and come to school. Oh yes, we had a short talk with Fujishima-san during lunch, and we decided to postpone our visit, don't you remember?"

"Eh? Ah, Foundation Day....."

".....You seem to be in somewhat bad condition today, huh. I'm really worried if you'll remember what I said. Ah, whatever. I'll mail or phone you at night so that you don't forget. See ya."

Yukina left Yui's side.

And then in her place, an idiot came.

"Yui~! Let's go to the clubroom~"

The man with delicate features and a slim figure smiled gently as if he was happy about something. That was Aoki Yoshifumi.

"Ahh....., it's you?"

"What's with that rotation?! Aren't you happy that you can be with me in the club after this?!"



"Not one bit!"

"T-That's being too frank....."

Aoki hung his head with a jerk, then almost instantly raised his head and laughed. Seeing his actions, Yui started thinking.

*If this guy knows that I've been confessed to by a girl, what would he do?*

*This guy has always been repeatedly saying that he likes me.*

*What is he thinking, saying that he likes me?*



After school, in the Cultural Research Club room.

Even though all five CRC members have gathered today, they were all doing their own thing.

Yaegashi Taichi, as usual, was revising the things he had learnt today and preparing for the next day's classes.

"Alright, I'm done with this for now."

For a moment, Taichi put down his mechanical pencil and looked around the room while stretching.

Right next to Taichi were Nagase Iori and Aoki Yoshifumi, who were having an Othello battle.

Approaching the end of the game, the board was practically filled with white pieces.

"Fufufu, what are you going to do, Aoki-kun? Surely you're not going to present me with two straight perfect games?"

Nagase said in a villain-like voice. Matching her swaying body, the tied-up hair behind her swung around.

"Strong.....! Too strong, Iori-chan.....!"

By the way, Taichi had also dominated Aoki. (But of course, not a perfect game).

Rap, tap. Noticing the sound of someone hitting the table, Taichi turned to look at the opposite side.

"Hey, Yui. What have you been doing? You look distracted."

Stretching her back and facing a laptop, Inaba Himeko, stared at Kiriya Yui after a sidelong glance.

"Eh, uh, I wasn't doing anything in particular."

Exposed by the keen gaze, Kiriya squirmed restlessly.

Comparing Inaba, who generally gave off a sharp and cool impression, with Kiriya, who was like a small animal, I started to imagine a pit viper looming over a scared hamster.

"You've been making rummaging sounds the entire time, haven't you?"

It was exactly as Inaba said. Since she came into the club room, Kiriya had looked off for the past one hour or so. She wasn't doing anything, but just being fidgety.

"Noth, nothing particular....."

"What's more, you've been always glancing repeatedly inside your bag."

"Wh-What are you saying, Inaba? I wasn't looking. Really. Yeah, really. For sure, really."

While babbling on, Kiriya dragged the bag across the table to herself. It looked as if she was moving it away from Inaba.

.....Her intention was surprisingly easy to read.

"There's something in the bag~."

Nagase peered into Kiriya's bag, which had been pulled towards her.

"No, no don't!"

The panicking Kiriya lifts the bag and away from Nagase.

And, in that instance, "something" lightly fell from the bag, but Kiriya did

not notice it. Instead, Inaba noticed this "something" and picked it up. It was a light blue envelope.

"Ehhh, I'm somewhat curious~. Come on, tell us what's inside~"

With a childishly sparkling smile, Nagase poked Kiriya.

"What, what? I want to know too!"

Aoki also took advantage of this opportunity and added his voice into the mix.

While the three of them were making a racket, Inaba, with the envelope in her hand, started to check the contents of the envelope without any hesitation at all.

That action was too spontaneous, and Taichi did not have the chance to stop her.

"Eh, 'I like you as a love interest. Starting today, for one week, I will be waiting outside the auditorium after club activities have finished.' ---"

"Wait, why?! Huh?! Inaba, Stop!"

"Yui, you received a love letter?! Hyuuhyuu!<sup>[3]</sup> Way to go!"

"Who is it! Who is the guy who dares approach Yui while knowing of my existence?! I shall not allow this! But I accept the challenge as a rival!"

Because it was confirmed that Kiriya had received a love letter, the temperature in the room rose. Frankly, Taichi was also curious about it.

"There's no big deal having your love letter read, is there? It's only saying that someone likes someone else. 'When it's convenient, please come. If you do not come, I will give up.' ---"

"I said don't read it!"

Kiriya swooped down on Inaba to snatch her love letter, but she twisted her body and resisted.

"Come on, it shouldn't be something you would dislike that much! Good grief! 'Also, if you can, please do not speak of this to anyone. Class 1C Oosawa Misaki' .....Oosawa Misaki?"

Suddenly, Inaba stopped moving.

Even Nagase and Aoki, who had been making a ruckus, stiffened, as if the pause button had been pressed. Incidentally, it was the same for Taichi.

"That's....., that's why I said not to read it....."

"Oosawa Misaki..... the Misaki-chan in the Track and Field club and in our class?"

With a dumbfounded expression, Nagase muttered.

Oosawa Misaki was a classmate of Taichi. She was a lanky sports girl with short cut hair that really fits her. If Taichi wasn't mistaken, she had chosen to specialize in hurdles.

".....I, I didn't think that reading this love letter would be this bad..... Sorry. We definitely won't spread this, so....."

Inaba, someone who hardly accepts her own errors, was honestly reflecting on her actions. She returned the stationary paper in to the envelope and quietly handed it to Kiriyaama.

The room was trapped in an unspeakably unpleasant atmosphere.

Abnormally awkward.

"No, well, it's that, I suppose." After sputtering some meaningless words, Inaba spoke again in a forcefully cheerful voice.

"In, in any case..... There's nothing that can be done now that we know already. And, Yui is worried about how to reject her, right? As an apology, we'll assist as much as possible!"

"Huh? Ahh....., well, yeah....."

Looking at the wrong direction, Kiriyaama mumbled.

"Hey, don't hold back. You can't be seriously having a dilemma about whether to reject or not, right----"

"Fueh!"

Surprised, Kiriyaama jumped up.

"No way, you..... you really think it could work?"

"You're wrong, ummm..... uh."

Yui hid her flushed face.

Aoki leant forward with so much force that he flipped the Othello board.

"Wait a second, Yui! You have that kind of preference?!"

"No! That's not it! .....It's not like that but, wh-when I tried thinking about why a relationship between two girls wouldn't work, I couldn't think on a reason....."

"There's no reason, but it's obvious that it's best for a girl and a guy to be together, isn't it!"

As an advocate for Kiriya's love, Aoki was flustered. Naturally.

"B-But, if I tried a relationship with a girl, I'd understand her thoughts and be more at ease, right..... On the other hand, I don't understand what guys are thinking, and that makes me insecure....."

"If it's between girls, you won't be able to do 'that stuff', which is more important than dating! It has to be with a man!"

After Aoki shouted, Kiriya started to look frightened in a way that she hadn't before.

It looked like she had taken some kind of shock.

"Ah..... In the end that's what guys are interested in. As I thought, men are..... dirty."

Kiriya whispered quietly.

For their lack of expression, her words were sharp and piercing.

"No, I didn't mean it like that, I mean."

Kiriya ignored Aoki, who was trying to explain, and put the love letter back into her bag.

"I'm going home for today..... Bye."

Leaving behind those words, Kiriya exited from the club room.

The door shut with a slam.

Ready to chase after Kiriya, Aoki instantly stood up and sat back down in his seat right after.

"I-I've done it..... But it's not like that's all I have in my mind....."

Bang, Aoki hit his head on the table.

"Seems like she misunderstood in a really weird way, huh---"

Nagase raised her eyebrows with a troubled expression.

"I don't think that what you said was completely wrong, and I understand why you said that with so much spirit, but..... The timing and the way you said it were pretty bad."

Inaba sighed and continued.

"If Yui goes down "that route" ..... It'd be your fault, Aoki."

"Is, is that even possible?! If that happens..... this is bad..... By simple calculations the number of rivals has increased by two times....."

"You're worried about that?"

Taichi absentmindedly said.

"No, but as I thought, there's no way she'll open her eyes to "that route" so simply, right! Yui also realizes that it probably won't work if she's not with a man, right! And then she'll come around to me, probably!"

"Sorry for raining on your parade when you're being so extremely positive, but I believe the latter has quite an uncertain factor."

Taichi murmured, just to be sure.

"Maybe? Who knows? It may look like it's not so bad, but on the other hand--  
\_"

Inaba cut off her words and looked at Taichi's direction for a moment.

"---that girl has androphobia, and the reality is that she more or less holds a distrust for men. You could say that Yui has the factor that allows her to be easily connected to "that route". In any case, there are many sensitive



adolescent boys and girls who misunderstand and believe that they're on the other side."

"My Yui won't be....."

"It's not 'my'..... Also, Inaba, that's an absolutely lofty view. You're one of those sensitive teenagers yourself."

*Occasionally..... or rather, frequently, Inaba forgets that we are the same age.*

"I think that even if Yui run down "that route", I'll give my support to her for sure."

"Iori-chan, you're already assuming that Yui will run down "that route"!?"

"Even so, that Oosawa girl..... That's quite unexpected..... Come to think of it, recently in class, I've noticed her talking to Fujishima too frequently."

Surprised, Nagase's body shook in response to Inaba's monologue.

"Why..... is Fujishima-san..... entangled in this?"

Having boldly announced in front of Taichi that she was interested in both genders and that she was interested in Nagase, and was for some reason reputed as "The go-to for love advice Fujishima-san", was the class 1C class representative, Fujishima Maiko.

By the way, since that incident with Fujishima, Nagase's attitude towards her had become weird.

"Well, I've only noticed them talking. Fujishima, huh? I've recently heard some weird intel about that girl. Anyway, if Fujishima is entangled in this....."

".....Then Yui probably won't be able to return to this world already. What if she's in the evil clutches of Misaki-chan and Fujishima-san.....!"

"Really, what on earth is Fujishima?"

That was something that Taichi had recently become increasingly curious about.

"Boohoo~, stop saying unlucky things, Inaba-chan and Iori-chan~"

"Don't cry, you depressing thing. However, with Yui's personality and this flow of events..... If it becomes worse, we'll move right away. It'd probably be good

to place her under observation..... and prepare for the possibilities."

Inaba muttered with a pensive look. Next to her, Taichi also felt uneasy about this strange development.

*Kiriyama is leaning towards the bisexual Fujishima's argument of "Isn't it also possible between girls?"*

*What on earth is going to happen?*



Having left the club room, Kiriyama headed towards the sports grounds on foot.

Hiding in the shadows of the sports store house, she observed the track and field club's practice.

Yui found Oosawa Misaki's figure immediately. She knew how Oosawa looked like since their two classes are combined for physical education, and Oosawa is a good athlete and the type to stand out from the rest.

With large strides, she used her entire body like a spring and jumped over the hurdle.

A tall frame, short cut hair and well-defined facial features.

The appearance of her legs, which were like that of a white goat, stretching out of the shorts on her tightened body looked so cool that Kiriyama, who was of the same gender, was charmed.

"Ah..... oh no!"

Oosawa's leg got caught on one of the hurdles and she fell with a loud crash. Is she okay?

Indifferent to Yui's concern, Oosawa stood up without showing any signs of pain. She then replaced the hurdle in its original position as if nothing had happened.

She slapped off the sand on her body, and lightly waved her hand, as if saying "I'm fine" to the other girls from her club rushing to her.

As a finishing touch, Oosawa clapped her hands to get rid of the sand, then quickly walked away.

*She was totally cool.*

"If I had to choose, I'd have to say that she seems like she'd be popular with the same gender....."

*Why did she choose me?*

*I think that I'm unworthy of her attention.*

*..... Huh? If I'm thinking about being "unworthy", then..... Have I put girls into my "dating choices"?*

*"I don't know anymore....."*

Yui grabbed her hair as she looked at the boys and girls on the sports ground.

*Boys are generally rugged, big, and scary, and also somehow..... dirty.*

*I think that they're different living creatures from me.*

*I can't imagine what I'm thinking.*

*Of course, I know that I don't only think badly of them.*

*Thanks to a friend, I know that I shouldn't be that scared of them.*

*But while that may be true, there's no way that I can think of wanting to be right next to them.*

*On the other hand, girls look soft and are cute. I have peace of mind when they're close by, and I want to hug them tightly.*

*Honestly, I think that I want to be together with them.*

*.....The more I think, the more I feel that girls are better than guys.*

*But as I expected, it would be really weird ---.*

*"There's nothing weird about it."*

*"Uwahhh?!"*

Shocked, Yui leapt up in response to the sudden voice.

She turned towards the direction of the voice.

A girl with refreshing eyes and glasses that seemed to really fit her image stood in front of her. Her hair was bundled up at the back of her head, and held up in front, revealing her forehead.

"Errr, I believe you're the class representative of Class 1C....."

"Have I never met and talked with you like this, I wonder? Greetings, Kiriya-san. I am Class 1C's representative, Fujishima Maiko. Nice to meet you."

Fujishima lowered her head and bowed.

"Thanks, you too. You're polite. I am Kiriya Yui."

"It's fine, I understand. Right now, you are worried about being trapped in the fetters of this mundane world. I know that much."

"Eh?! Wh-Wh-What are you talking about?!"

"Weren't you having troubling thoughts just now?"

"C-Certainly, that's true..... wait, why do you know?! Did I even say anything?!"

"Someone of my stature will hear the whispers of eager love can be followed. It's not important, so don't worry about it."

".....I'm really curious about it, though"

What should I do? This kid is weirder than I thought.

"Anyways, for me, whether it's biological or ethical, those kind of deep topics don't matter."

"Err, what on earth are you trying to say....."

"The important thing is, is there 'love'? That's all."

"Is there..... 'love'.....?"

*Those were stupid and clumsy words, but for some reason, they penetrated my heart.*

*Affection?*

*Love?*<sup>[4]</sup>

"I will always be an ally to a girl in love. So don't worry about the small matters, and only focus on finding the important things. Right, it's all up to you now, so I'll be going."

Fujishima raised her glasses with a snap and then headed for the school building.

*What was that all about?*

"Wait a minute..... why was Fujishima even in this area?"

*It's a mystery.*

In the end, while Yui had drawn no conclusions about how to reply, the time to leave school arrived.

Music signaling the end of club activities and the school day resounded, and each club was wrapping up their practice.

In any case, it would be better to directly meet Oosawa Misaki to hear the details, among other things. Deciding to do that, Yui headed to the back of the designated auditorium and waited for Oosawa.

The sun had almost sunken and it became dimmer.

However, where Yui was standing, the light shining from the interior of the auditorium was bright enough to distinguish the faces of people a small distance away from her.

"It's here, right? Ah~, what should I do? The Track and Field practice is already over, I think. Almost time, I wonder..... There is a chance that she might not come..... Even though I came all the way here, what if the love letter was actually a prank.....! I-If that's true, what should I do.....?! I'm such an idiot----"

"K-Kiriyama-san?!"

"Y-Yes!"

Surprised at suddenly being called, Yui jumped up.

Why is it that I've been encountering similar scenes today?

From the direction of the sports grounds, Oosawa dashed with amazing speed and stopped in front of Yui.

"So-sorry. Did I make you wait.....? I didn't think that you'd come at all....."

"No, not at all."

Unable to find words to continue, Yui lowered the tone of her voice.

Looking at Oosawa from up close, Yui found her to be a beautiful and cool girl. Oosawa seemed to be more than ten centimeters taller than Yui.

That girl in front of her eyes was now incoherently saying "Ummm, well, that, this....."

Oosawa, who had a cool and composed expression during her club practice, was now blushing.

.....A somewhat hazy feeling rose in her chest.

"Y-You read the letter and came, right?"

"Y-Yeah"

"Sorry, ..... Really. Suddenly writing something like that and giving it to you..... It surprised you, right....."

"Don't apologize. That..... did surprise me though."

"You didn't think it was troublesome?"

"If I thought it was troublesome then I wouldn't have came here. That's why, it's alright."

Yui kindly said. The tearful expression on Oosawa's face softened in an instant.

Yui's chest choked up.

*What's with the throbbing of my chest?*

"Anyway, I don't really understand the situation....."

Since Oosawa looked so awfully unstable, Kiriya was able to stay slightly calm. If not, she would be the one panicking.



"Y-Yeah, you're right. Umm, I I-like you, Kiriya-san..... It'll be good if we could go on a date..... I was thinking."

".....Wait, Wait a second. Do you mean as lovers? But we're both girls."

".....Yeah. I went to an all-girls middle school though..... And it seems like I'm somewhat popular with girls..... And various things happened..... Inside me, I have this feeling..... that being with girls is fine."

Yui wanted to ask about the "various things", but she put it aside for now.

"But, but I only felt that way during the all-girls school. And because I entered a mixed-gender school, I thought it would be over, but..... Then I saw Kiriya-san..... and then....."

Oosawa said while avoiding eye contact, and glimpsed at Yui's face.

"Ugh.....!"

Yui was caught by the eyes filled with hot tears, and she felt "something" thumping in her chest.

"I-I have never confessed to anyone before..... Since I've only been courted, I wanted to try it myself..... I wanted to try and forget about this feelings but..... as I thought I couldn't lie to myself..... In the end, Fujishima-san gave me a push from the back, and I became determined."

"Eh? Fujishima-san?"

*Why is Fujishima's name coming up here?*

*Well, whatever.* Shaking off unnecessary things, Yui opened her mouth.

"Erm..... Yeah, amazing, I know. Er, I'm happy that you have such good feelings for me. But why me? I mean, I think we've only interacted during physical education classes. I don't remember having a conversation, either....."

"Well, that's....."

After Oosawa fidgeted with her limbs for a while, she resolutely stared at Yui.

That look was the same one Oosawa had during her competitions.

"During physical education class, that time you were running for the long jump..... Kiriya-san's jump was probably something I won't forget for the

rest of my life, I think. That overwhelming speed and decisiveness, the gutsy form you had when dancing through the air..... I was really moved by that. Is there any living thing in this world that beautiful, I thought."

"T-too much praise!"

Yui put her hands on her cheeks, which had become really hot.

"With so much strength hidden in that small body, as well as that extremely powerful jump, Kiriya-san was seriously amazing, I thought..... From then on, my eyes seemed to always follow Kiriya-san..... I saw you as a girl with great reflexes and cuter than any other girl..... By the time I noticed..... I was completely..... in love with you!"

Unable to resist until the end, Oosawa shut her eyes.

After her statement, her cheeks were dyed pink and her body softly trembled.

*Isn't this girl a little too cute?*

*Or perhaps I should say, completely ----*

"Gap moe<sup>[5]</sup>.....!"

Yui heard her desire switch flip with a click.

*Can this cuteness come from the likes of men?!*

"Umm..... why did you suddenly throw a fist.....?"

"Ah, don't mind me. I'm just talking to myself."

*This is bad. This girl. She's really cute.*

The impression of Oosawa's amazingly boyish outer appearance and cool attitude while talking was really strong.

And yet, right now, that Oosawa has changed into her little girl chick mode. *Is that even possible?*

GAP.

THIS IS BAD.

EARTH-SHATTERING.

CUTE.

MOE MOE.

"And..... well. If you don't hate it, would you go on a date with me once? You don't know anything about me, but I hope you can make a decision here....."

"Date? If it's a date, then no problem!"

Yui replied, and Oosawa's face brightened in a flash.

"R-Really?! Are you sure?!"

"You're cute, so it's all okay!"

*Cute is justice!*

"T-then, tomorrow is Foundation Day and we don't have school, but..... are you free?"

"Errrm, I did have plans with friends..... ah, no, that's wrong. I did have plans but they were cancelled. I believe Fujishima-san did have something on-----"

*Huh..... Fujishima-san again? Just before, it seemed like Fujishima-san's name appeared in every important point.....?*

*Well, that's alright.*

*Anyhow, it's because cute is justice!*



In front of Taichi's line of sight were Kiriya and Oosawa enjoyably talking about their plans for tomorrow while walking off.

Confirming that they had left, Taichi came out of hiding with Nagase, Inaba, and Aoki.

The four of them had peeked at Kiriya's and Oosawa's entire exchange while anticipating and preparing for the worst.

"She's opened her eyes to it! She's gone! She's gone yonder! Gawd, Misaki-chan sure is popular! She's soooo cute!"

Completely breaking character, Nagase shouted in a fake Kansai dialect<sup>[6]</sup>. It looks like she was really excited.

Taichi murmured.

"Well, I feel it's not so bad as it seems."

Beside him, Aoki grabbed his head and moaned.

"I'll stop them by hook or by crook.....! And then bring Yui back to the pure, right path.....!"

"Their relationship....., might work."

Inaba let out a sigh and said.

"Inaba-chan?! Why are you saying that with such a serious tone?!"

"Well, isn't this kind of development fine? If you think about it, Yui would be able to have a new character."

"That's exactly what I can't agree with, Inaba-chan!"

"Even so, Yui is Yui, right? I think that it'll work too."

"Iori-chan's pure spirit is too dazzling! That's it! Certainly that may be so~"

"Cheer up, Aoki."

"Taichi! He said that in a way that assumes that I already lost and became depressed, didn't you?! By the way, sympathy is the most damaging! But not yet, I still haven't given up yet!"

"Haha, so why not give up now?"

"Huh.....? Iori-chan, doesn't that seem too merciless? You're poking me with a poisoned needle while smiling fully, aren't you?"

"That's why cheer up, Aoki."

Taichi said to him once more.

"If you continue being kind to me, I'll cry, y'know? I'll cry?"

"Alright, let's stop bullying Aoki now."

"As I thought, you guys were just playing with me....."

With a jerk, Aoki kneeled down in response to Inaba's words.

Taichi didn't actually had the intention of bullying Aoki, but..... he decided not to say that. Inaba would probably make fun of him if he did. You live and learn.

"If they truly want to be together, then I don't plan to say anything. It's just that Fujishima has intruded, and I can't just sit and watch. Especially if it might be Yui's significant turning point."

"I, I agree! I agree! I think it'll be a great idea to tail them on their date tomorrow!"

"Ahh, that's true."

"But, isn't tailing them on a date not so good? Morally speaking."

"Taichi. Are you stupid? Are you going to let this interesting event slip away?"

Inaba stared at Taichi with scornful eyes.

"Huh? Wasn't I just saying something correct?"

That was supposed to be the case, but the atmosphere in the room somehow seemed to imply that Taichi was mistaken.

"While saying with those words, Inaba is actually extremely worried about Yui, right?"

While Nagase grinned and laughed, Inaba clicked her tongue with a dissatisfied "Tch".

"Whatever, I don't really care about what happens..... In any case, I'll be tailing Yui on her date tomorrow! Any of you want to come, come!"



It was the day after finding the love letter in the shoe locker and being hit by the surging waves of developments.

Today is Yamaboshi High School's Foundation Day, so there's no school.

Many students see it as a god-sent holiday and will fully enjoy that one day.

However, KiriYama Yui did not have that option. That morning, after getting up from bed, her brain was occupied and packed with worries, and her head was fit to burst.

"I went with the flow and said okay to the date yesterday....."

After waking up from her sleep, the somewhat calm Yui whispered to herself in her room.

".....What if I made her have some strange expectations?"

Without thinking deeply, she had naively accepted that "Well, even if it's called a date, it's only two girls going out for fun, right?"

*But, Oosawa definitely intended to do more than that and planned to have a proper "date".*

*That's right.*

*This is a fully-fledged date.*

"What should I do.....? I haven't had a date before~"

On her chair, Yui's hands and legs clattered around.

"Date..... date? Huh..... what is a date? Is meeting people a date?"

She had become unclear about the definition of the word. It didn't matter at all, but Yui was curious, and she took out a thick dictionary from her bookshelf.

"Err- 'date'..... 'date'..... here it is."

***(1) Specific day, day and time.***

***(2) A meeting between a man and a woman on a decided day and time. A lover's rendezvous.***

Bam.

Yui closed the dictionary.

"A lover's..... rendezvous....."

*So it was such a huge thing.....!*



*But we're not a man and a woman!*

*We're just two girls!*

*I want to consult with someone. But I don't know who to ask, what should I say, and how to say it. Firstly, a normal love story is fine, but since this is such a serious matter, it's difficult to tell it to someone frankly and completely.*

Yui thought back to Oosawa's bright smile yesterday when they had parted.

*What kind of emotions does Oosawa have while going for this date?*

*And how should I prepare my heart to accept Oosawa's feelings?*

*Date. Dating. Affection. Love.*

*There's too many things I don't understand.*



It was just before 1PM.

All members of the CRC except for Kiriya Yui had gathered at the commercial complex in the suburbs.

This was the place where Oosawa Misaki and Kiriya had promised to have a date.

The complex was complete with a shopping mall, movie theatre, bowling alley and a combined entertainment facility. It has been judged to be a spot that gives people no trouble for entertainment options.

Since it was quite a distance away, it wasn't exactly "a regular hang-out spot for Yamaboshi High School Students". Because of that, the chances of bumping into acquaintances there was low and it was ideal for Yamaboshi High School students on a date. (According to Inaba who has a hobby of collecting and analyzing information)

Taichi and the 3 others lined up and took up their positions in the landing of the staircase. Their field of vision included a plaza with a fountain. They were

supposed to wait till 1:30PM.

"How will it turn out, I wonder. What do you think? The one who said all that about leaving them alone but came along anyway, Yaegashi-kun?"

Inaba asked in a scornful tone.

"If you would tail someone alone, then it would be better with two or three..... sorry. I mean, it's mainly because I was intrigued and I don't like being left out. Yes."

Taichi stopped giving excuses after being stared at by Inaba.

"I don't want you here if you're half-heartedly and half-interested. This is a battlefield, after all."

"Aoki is too excited about this, for sure."

Taichi, who had binoculars hanging down his neck and had been doing warm-up exercises up till now, retorted at the earnestly observing Aoki.

"Ah--, when will Yui introduce us to Misaki-chan, I wonder-?"

"You've said the same yesterday, Iori-chan, but on the inside, you really believe that those two are already dating?!"

"It is a date..... am I right?"

"Unununu.....!"

"Those two match completely well, I think."

"Guoh.....!"

"Nagase..... If this goes on, Aoki seems like he'll lose his energy, so please leave this teasing for later."

"Yes, sir. If Taichi says so, I have no choice."

Nagase raised her hands with a mischievous smile.

*If Aoki faints in agony to this kind of jab, I wonder what will happen if he gets hit by a real megaton punch?*

"By the way, talking about the problem at hand, with four of us tailing them..... isn't it easy to get found out?"

"It's fine, don't worry."

Inaba nodded to Nagase's question with confidence.

Since she was Inaba, she was probably thinking of some sort of strategy. What kind of strategy----

"How should I put it, girls in love can only see themselves."

----Or lack thereof.

"I think that might be pushing it, though....."

Taichi couldn't help but play the straight man. *Is this Inaba's style of tomfoolery<sup>[7]</sup>?*

"I see, as expected from Inaban."

".....And you guys agreed with her?"

"Is my view out of sync with everyone else's?" Taichi wondered with a little worry.



As the afternoon drew near, Yui was endlessly troubled with her worries.

In the end, anxious about her worries, Yui ---- became completely serious.

Anyways, there's no way that she could break a promise, so she went to the date. She decided to leave anything happening afterwards to chance.

In the corner of her head a faint voice said, "Isn't this just deferring the problem? I'm not resolving anything, am I?", but Yui chose not to care about it.

Choosing what kind of clothes to wear was another difficult question that stood in her way.

To say the least, it's a date. (And the other party is a girl)

Dressing shoddily is absurd. Even so, Yui also didn't like being thought of as dressing too flashily.

At the end of her intense deliberation, she chose a simple style, with a checkered shirt that had a collar and cuffs, and a pleated skirt.

This kind of style is probably just right.

Once again, a voice echoed in the corner of her head. "Aren't you just choosing someone within reach since worrying will only waste time?" Yui also paid this voice no heed.

Yui arrived near the meeting place twenty minutes before the promised time.

It was a weekday and it wasn't completely devoid of people, but it was still quite a sparse area.

"Err, that's the square with the fountain. Wah, this is quite nerve-racking."

Yui looked around restlessly while walking and then turned around. It was at that moment.

""Ah""[\[8\]](#)

In front of the meeting spot, she unexpectedly came across Oosawa.

"Eh.....umm.....ah"

"Ah.....erm.....well"

Since both of them weren't mentally prepared, they panicked.

Then, Oosawa took one, two deep breaths.

And with a wide grin she laughed.

"Good afternoon, KiriYama-san. Let's enjoy today."

She said, as her smile grew deeper.

She wore a pair of rolled-up denim pants with a cut and sewn shirt and a grey casual jacket on top.

That's quite, or rather, pretty cool-cute. (A compound word that combines cool and cute) Yui's tension gauge shot up instantly.

"I might just suddenly do..... a lead-off punch."

"Eh? What are you talking about?"

"It's fine, don't mind me. Anyways, good job."

Huhu, Yui let out a laugh unconsciously. A cute girl really recuperates the eyes.

"KiriYama-san sometimes has these weird switches, huh..... With that said..... I quite like it."

"Stop, stop, even with that kind of compliment....."

Yui waved her hands in front of her face. Her face was burning.

"By the way, the timing of our arrival was completely together, you know. I actually wanted to have an exchange like 'Did you wait?' 'No, I just came too.'"

Oosawa stuck out her tongue and smiled.

Yesterday's nervousness seems to have calmed down.

Oosawa seemed to give off the atmosphere of her usual self.

Well, at school she has a stiffer, or rather, cool impression. Today, it can be said that Oosawa is more of her natural self.

The fact is that Oosawa is showing me expression that she doesn't usually show.

For some reason, Yui's chest tightened a little.

It was a fresh new feeling that she has not felt until now.

"But on the other hand, arriving here with the same timing..... totally feels like destiny."

"De..... destiny, that's..... uwawa."

Her head boiled with a whistle.

"Ahaha, I'm just kidding. If that can be taken as destiny, we'll have innumerable miracles today."

"Eh? Ah, right."

"Well, we won't get anything done just standing here talking, Shall we go?"

"Y-Yeah."

Oosawa walked off and Yui followed.

*That's great. It seems like Oosawa is taking the lead. That's a help, since I don't know what I should do.*

Yui let out a sigh. At the same time, she thought, "I wonder what a date is", as the anticipation inside her heart expanded.



While hiding behind cover, Taichi and the three others watched over the figures of Oosawa and Kiriya, who were smoothly on a date.

Oosawa and Kiriya had chosen to start with window shopping. Now they entered a stylish department store.

Taichi had been worried about whether they could successfully tail them, but they unexpectedly managed somehow. Perhaps those two were that engrossed in their own personal world.

".....Even so, this is too close."

Taichi said while being careful with the volume of his voice.

While Taichi and the Tailing Squad were paying heed to not getting caught, they had approached their targets to the distance of only one shelf. It was so close that Oosawa and Kiriya's conversation could be heard.

"Don't you want to listen to their conversation once? To get a feeling of their mood."

*Inaba's so calm and composed. I want to ask what her confidence is based on.*

"Even so, it's four people....."

"That's why I said it's better if you didn't come."

"Well, I have the duty to watch over so everyone doesn't do anything rash....."

"What's with that pseudo-Tsundere girl template pronouncement? Don't you



think it's lame when you said it yourself?"

"I'm not lame at all."

.....that's what I want to believe.

"Oi, you two are loud, I said!"

Nagase noticed the two and then tilted her head.

"Huh? I think something like this has happened before....."

"In any case, you three should be quiet. Seriously."

Placing his two hands behind his ears, Aoki's eyes were focused.

.....Really, if they make any more noise, I'll beat them up.....

The whisper of a female voice that was neither Inaba's nor Nagase's could be heard.

"W-Who?!"

Taichi turned around. But there was no signs of anyone around. Could it be that he was just imagining things?

*"Ah, look. Don't you think these glasses look cute, Kiriya-san?"*

*"Oh, they really suit you, yeah. You look super intelligent!"*

*"Really? Thanks. Kiriya-san, try them on too."*

*"Eh? I wonder if glasses would look good on me....."*

*"It'll be great. Try them on."*

*"Hmm, fine..... How do I look?"*

*"As I thought, they look great on you. Here, try looking at the mirror."*

*"Ohhh..... it's better than I thought"*

*"Shall I take a photo with my phone?"*

*"Eh~? You don't have to. More importantly, isn't that cup over there cute?"*

*Let's go look."*

Oosawa and Kiriyaama headed towards another shelf.

They went to an open area, so Taichi and the others didn't try getting closer.

"If sound effects are added, it would be kind of like 'Kya~Kyu~Fufu'"

"Yeah, I also have that feeling when seeing them from a distance. It looks like they're having fun."

Inaba whispered and Nagase responded with a nod.

"No, not yet. Rather, that atmosphere I get is that they're still only friends.....!"

"Aoki, even if you don't get depressed, we'll think of a way together to rob your love back."

"Inaba-chan, are you already thinking about what to do after my defeat?!"

"Truthfully speaking, defeat is weird way to say it."

Taichi said to no one in particular.

"Misaki-chan is a good kid, I think~. Ah, shall we get Misaki to join the Cultural Research Club at this point? I don't mind if she's in two clubs."

As usual, Nagase said something random.



Before heading into the entertainment complex, Yui and Misaki took a quick break.

"I'll go buy us something to drink, kay?"

"Yeah, thanks."

Leaving Yui sitting on the bench, Oosawa walked away.

Yui thought of following her, but she wanted to do some thinking alone.

She watched Oosawa's back disappear from sight.

*That's the person I'm on a date with, she thought as her chest felt fuzzy.*

"What's with..... this?"

Whispering to herself, Yui pressed her hands around her chest.

Her heart was beating in quick thumps.

*It's nothing, it's just two girls having fun.*

*I've gone out so many times with just one friend.*

*You can't say that there's anything weird about this.*

*The things I'm doing is the same as when I'm going out with a friend. It's not like there's any special meaning behind this just because it's a date.*

*Then why does my heart beat so fast when I'm aware that this is a date?*

*It's like I'm seeing the world differently when I'm walking with the person who said that she likes me.*

*It's inexplicable.*

*Am I..... in love..... with Oosawa?*

"No, no, that's a mistake. That can't be."

*There's no way I love her yet. Of course, I like her because she's great, but that "like" is not the "like" from a romantic feeling, I think. Probably.*

*Then when would I be said to "have come to like someone romantically"?*

*I don't know.*

*But right now, I understand that "love" is quite a good thing.*

".....Hmm? What..... is this..... spicy smell? Tchoo!"

Yui sneezed.

*It's a good thing that I sneezed when Oosawa isn't around, Yui thought as she felt more relief than necessary, and somehow felt queer.*



Oosawa walked off on her own, leaving Kiriyama on the bench.

That situation was seen by Taichi and the others from the second floor balcony.

It looks like their window shopping has finished. The place Kiriyama sitting at was in the middle of the path to the entertainment facilities. It was thought that they are planned to head there next.

"Ah, that's a expressions of a girl in love."

Inaba said as she observed Kiriyama seeing Oosawa off.

"A girl in love you said..... I can't..... I can't take any more of this.....!"

Aoki quickly started stomping towards the direction of the stairs.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

"Don't stop me, Taichi..... even if I lose, I can't let it end this way, can I?"

"Calm down, Aoki."

Nagase stepped in to block his path.

But Aoki ignored the obstacle and ran off.

"We'll have just one more fight.....! I can't die and leave things this way----ouch?!"

And then he fell dramatically.

"Ow ow ow..... What the heck?! Someone's foot suddenly flew out from behind the pillar....."

"I understand your 'love', but I hope you don't get in the way of those two's romance. We're getting to the good part, after all."

A pair of glasses flashed in the sun's light.

The revealed figure was the person who was perceived to be overseeing this matter from the beginning, Class 1C Class President Fujishima Maiko.

"Fu, Fujishima-san?!"

"You finally came out, Fujishima."

Next to a surprised Nagase, Inaba showed a fearless smile.

"Fujishima..... Wait a minute, did Inaba actually anticipate this development?"

Taichi asked, as he remembered the weird feeling and the avant verrais<sup>[9]</sup> from earlier.

"Of course. Firstly, tailing those two today had the greater implication of restraining Fujishima. Moreover, it was to prevent any weird intrusions from turning this situation in a weird direction."

"I didn't know at all..... You could have told me."

"It's unthinkable that I would turn this in a weird direction. It's the correct one."

"I think common sense wouldn't say that a relationship between girls is right. What do you think, Fujishima-san? Ahaha."

Nagase said. For some reason Nagase's intention of escaping Fujishima's lock-on slipped in and out of sight.

"Common sense..... is useless in front of 'love'."

"Ugh..... It's no use..... The female frontal attack didn't help."

Nagase pressed a hand on her forehead and looked up at the sky.

"Anyway!"

Fujishima raised her voice.

"There is no way I'll let you get in the way of Oosawa-san and Kiriya-san."

"Then, then what about my romance---"

"Aoki-kun, right? I'll ask you one thing, are you loved by Kiriya-san?"

"Loved by..... I wonder....."

"In that case, you are not qualified---."

"What, what qualification---"

"That's right, Aoki."

Inaba cut into Aoki's words and continued.

"Fujishima, you don't have the qualification to find fault with Aoki yourself."

"That, that's right! You're good Inaba-can! And now I'll just go down to Yui....."

"As I said, you can't."

Fujishima got blocked Aoki's path.

"What are you doing, Aoki! How can you not break through a girl like her?"

"Use a feint! Feint and go right! Do it Aoki!"

"Inaba..... and Nagase too..... Aren't you forgetting the original goal?"

Taking a sideward look at the two making a racket, Taichi murmured.

"You people didn't understand what I said.....! In that case I have no choice but throw this....."

Fujishima took something out from the bag on her shoulder.

"Eat this! I thought this might happen, so I made this last night. It's quite mild and there's no problem if you clean and rinse it off. But I'm afraid that you will have to do so, and you will be delayed. Pepper bomb! Take that!"

"Cough?! Cough?! Cough! Achhooo! Cough?!"

Having taken Fujishima's attack bodily, Aoki started choking and sneezing.

"There's more!"

Fujishima lobbed another pepper bomb in Taichi and the other's direction.

"Cough! What are you doing! My..... my eyes....."

"Cough cough! What, why are we also.....!"

Inaba and Nagase took damage and were in agony.

"Huh? I thought I was considerate enough and tweaked with the composition to make it mild. Was the amount too much, I wonder? Ah..... achoo!"

"Cough!..... If you have any consideration and common sense, then don't use

it at all!"

Taichi retorted with all his might.

".....Well, now you've been immobilized. In the meantime, you will lose track of Oosawa-san and Kiriya-san..... Ah. Dammit! Right now, Oosawa-san and Kiriya-san are resting, so they're not moving either.....!"

Once in a while, Fujishima displays her airheadedness at unwanted times.



In the amusement zone, Yui and Oosawa had taken up the challenge of a reaction game<sup>[10]</sup> and were pressing lighted buttons while looking at the screen.

"Hit hit hit! .....Hit!"

An electronic sound signalling the end of the game rang, and Yui stopped pressing the glowing buttons.

And then a more ostentatious electronic sound rung.

It seemed that the record from Yui and Oosawa's co-op play was the highest score in that machine's history.

"Yes! Aren't I quite amazing?"

"Quite doesn't even come close to describing it, Kiriya-san..... You were in charge of seven out of the ten buttons and you didn't have a single miss. What kind of godlike reflexes do you have.....?"

Oosawa had gone beyond surprised and was nonplussed.

The commotion around reached Yui's ears.

"Aren't those kids amazing?" "Woah, what's with that score?!" "Can you even get that kind of score on this game?" "I was watching, and that small long-haired kid is too sick. That's some inhuman skills....."

Somehow, they've drawn attention to themselves.



"Shall we go over there?"

"Yea, Yeah."

Yui nodded to Oosawa's suggestion, and they moved to escape the spotlight.

"Ah, can I go to toilet?"

Oosawa said as they saw a toilet sign on the way.

"Alright, I'll be waiting here."

All alone, Yui raised her hands and she stretched her back with an "Ahh".

It was really fun, at least for now.

"If it's like this, I wouldn't mind doing this many times..... just kidding."

*Am I really?*

*But what if it really is possible?*

*That thought floated around in Yui's mind.*

*I don't know the meaning of a date.*

*I also don't know if dating a girl is a good thing.*

*But, it's certain that Oosawa said that she likes me.*

*I also certainly had fun playing with the person who said she likes me.*

*What if we call playing together like this a date?*

*If we don't do anything weird, and if it's fun, then Oosawa would be happy, and it probably wouldn't be bad.*

*Not particularly thinking deeply----.*

".....Huh? I somehow feel like I've heard that voice before....."

It could be heard from the other side.

*If it's an acquaintance....., I don't want to be found.*

Yui thought as she walked towards the direction of the voice to confirm whether it belonged to an acquaintance or not.



"You guys..... as I thought, you have not given up yet. You are still going to get in the way of their romance, huh?"

"Fuck off, Fujishima. What was that physical assault for?"

In the amusement zone where there were various arcade game machines, pool tables, billiard tables and a darts corner, Fujishima and Inaba were staring daggers at each other.

After getting hit by Fujishima's pepper bomb attack, Taichi and the others ended up having to rush to the washroom, which slowed them down for a fair amount of time.

After that, Taichi and Nagase tried to calm the irate Inaba, as well as Aoki, who was on the verge of a KO and saying his last words, "My youth is over.....". They tried searching the amusement complex where they thought Oosawa and Yui were heading to, but they encountered Fujishima yet again.

It seemed like they had been ambushed.

"Shouldn't you just give up? We should let those two do what they want."

"It's fine if they're doing what they want, but I can't see anything but them doing what you like. How about it, Fujishima?"

"Once again, that's wholly unexpected. I respect their desires the most."

"And by that, you'll draw Yui in to 'that world'? Can you proudly say that it's correct? While she's still not tainted, shouldn't we return her to the healthy path?"

"What is a 'healthy path'? Who in the world decided on that? Even if we make an argument on that, I don't think we can reach a conclusion."

Fujishima let out a sigh and turned the palm of her hands upward.

"That's true. Well, since it turned out like this..... we can only have some sort of competition to decide!"

Inaba pointed at Fujishima vigorously.

"Ohh, 'When the talking becomes complicated, then we fight'. Isn't that the pro-wrestling way of thinking.....!"

"Taichi, no one understands your pro-wrestling example, so just leave it."

Nagase pointed out.

*However, I am not worried about self-respect.*

*There are things that a man can't let slide.*

"Sure. What kind of contest? I'm fine with whatever you choose."

"Am I being underestimated..... Well then, we'll have a competition filled with true ability, how about table tennis!"

"Okay. If I win this, you will have to accept Kiriya-san and Oosawa-san's relationship."

"Then if our side wins, I mean, if Inaba-chan wins, then you'll have to accept me and Yui's relationship....."

Aoki, who had been revived unnoticed, said.

"Do whatever you want. I don't plan on losing, anyway."

"Ohhh, go for it! Good luck Inaba-chan! By the way, should I fight too?!"

"It's not your turn, Aoki. I'll give her a crushing defeat with these hands!"

"Finally, class 1C's "official leader" Fujishima-san and "secret leader" Inaba will clash.....! I'll spread the result to everyone in class tomorrow!"

Nagase had completely become just a curious onlooker.

In that way, Taichi and the others had become unusually excited.

So excited that they've forgotten their original motive.

"---You guys, what the heck are you doing.....?"

A dusky voice filled with killing sense rang out.



Taichi looked over his shoulder to see Kiriama, whose anger had broken

through the critical point.

*After making such a racket in the same room as the target we were tailing, of course we would be noticed.*

"I thought that you came out here just to hang out, but that doesn't seem to be it, am I right.....?"

Kiriyama spoke as the sides of her mouth twitched upwards.

"Yaho..... Yui. Ummm, where's Misaka-chan?"

Nagase asked timidly while making an effort to be cheerful and friendly.

"She was going to the toilet. And when I thought I heard a familiar voice....."

Kiriyama's tone was blurred with anger even when speaking to Nagase.

She has probably never been this angry before.

"What are you guys deciding on your own!!!"

The livid howl seemed to rattle the surrounding arcade machines.

"K-Kiriyama..... This place may be somewhat loud, but that volume will cause trouble to other people....."

"Shut up Taichi! What are all of you doing here, anyway?!"

"W-We don't want Yui to go down the dangerous path, so....."

"What dangerous path!? First of all, what I do is decided by me alone, isn't it?! I especially don't remember getting instructions from Aoki!"

"You used 'especially' for me..... Guh!"

"What's with this side saying that 'I will date Oosawa-san' if they win and the other saying that 'I will date Aoki!' Don't say what you like!"

"I was only clearing an obstacle for you two....."

"Even if you're only involved a little, don't fool around with me or I'll sock you, Fujishima-san!"

".....This is a person who's written off as merely serious when she's actually dead serious..... Apologize, Yaegashi-kun."

"Why are you making me apologize to her? Apologize yourself."

"That's enough, I don't want to repeat again so everyone disappear from this place! Get lost!"

Kiriyama stomped on the ground.

"I'll decide things for myself!"

Staring at the teary-eyed Kiriyama, Taichi and the others fell dead silent.

Kiriyama was serious, but we may have been fooling around a little too much. Everyone reflected on it.

That's what I thought, but with a snap of her fingers, Inaba made a gun shape with her hand and pointed it at Kiriyama.

And then she calmly opened her mouth.

"That's it, Yui. That's right, Yui."

"What, what is it?"

Kiriyama faltered at the indiscriminately meaningful words.

"It's something for you to decide. Something you must decide on."

Inaba moved one step forward and looked at Kiriyama square in the face.

"I will help you choose a path as much as I can. However, the final decision is yours to make. The responsibility of that final decision is also yours."

"What are you saying..... What the heck are you saying....."

Whispering in a wavering voice, Kiriyama tightly pursed her lips.

"That's all I'm going to say..... And tailing you was probably overdoing it. Sorry. We'll withdraw for now. Fujishima also, yes?"

Inaba turned in a circle and looked behind her.

"Oh well. I was emotional and I may have been too passionate. For that I am sincerely sorry. To Inaba and the others, I am also sorry."

Fujishima lowered her head, and from the direction of her mouth came the words, "See you at school, then." She then graciously withdrew.

She is absolutely unable to step out of place, and she properly reads the atmosphere, so it's impossible to detest her. That was Fujishima.

"We'll also be going, before Oosawa returns. Come on."

Prompted by Inaba, Taichi and gang said words of apology and left.

Lastly Taichi took a glance to check on Kiriya. She seemed angry, troubled, and looked like an abandoned dog. It was an expression that Taichi couldn't understand.

"Is this fine?"

Taichi questioned Inaba.

"It's okay like this. Actually, in order to say those words to make her self-aware. we purposely did that act to make ourselves conspicuous, didn't we?"

"Did you really plan that far ahead....."

*As always, Inaba is an amazing girl. As I thought, she's always one step above us.*

Nagase looked at Inaba with still eyes.

"Inaba. What happened just now only went that well by chance, am I right?"

"Uh....."

After Inaba groaned once, she purposely faced the side and started whistling.

".....Hey Inaba, what does that mean?"

Taichi looked at Inaba with suspicious eyes.

"Who cares! More importantly, Taichi and Iori have to make a final decision as well! I don't know if you two are just shy, but recently, aren't you two flat-out not having any arguments with each other!"

"I-It's not like that!" "I-It's not like that!"

"Ah" "Uh"

Covering each other's outbursts, Taichi and Nagase looked at each other and blushed.





Yui left the building together with Oosawa.

The red light of the evening sun illuminated the streets.

"Haa. Today was fun, KiriYama-san. Thank you so much."

Oosawa faced Yui with a refreshing smile.

"Yeah..... That's right....."

"KiriYama-san, you didn't look well back there. Was it boring, I wonder?"

"No! You're wrong! It's not like that, I really had fun."

Yui frantically denied.

"But..... I'm just a little tired, that's all."

Although it was actually because of what Inaba said to her.

"Sorry! I made you accompany me even when you're tired."

"No! No! I'm alright. I didn't hate it one bit. Don't apologize."

".....I see. Thanks"

Oosawa wore an invigorating smile.

Cool. That's the best word to describe her face, but her smiling face is really feminine and cute, too.

Once again, Yui felt that she was a pure and good girl.

It was a fact that she once viewed people who come to like the same gender as weird.

However, those kinds of feelings have completely disappeared.

Really, she's a normal and good girl.

And she said that she liked me---

"Umm"

Yui stopped walking and started to speak.

"Hmm?"

"That decision..... did it require a lot of courage? Confessing to the same gender, I mean."

After listening to Yui's words, Oosawa stiffened like a sculpture.

It was as if she wasn't breathing.

And in the next moment, a shining teardrop fell from the eyes of the beautiful frozen sculpture.

"Yeah..... I was really scared..... That's because it isn't normal..... If others know about it, they will think of me as weird..... I thought that there was no chance that you would accept. But because I like you. I consulted with an old friend and Fujishima, and then....."

Oosawa gloomily smiled as teardrops rolled down her cheeks.

Her crumbling face was really beautiful, Yui thought.

"Ahaha, why am I crying? .....Sorry, I'm going to the toilet for a while, wait for me!"

Oosawa sprinted out.

"Ah"

In an instant she lost sight of Oosawa. As expected of the Track and Field Club.

Yui was in two minds about whether to chase after her, but she gave up and decided to wait here, as she was told to.

Yui leaned on the railing at her side.

The slightly warm evening air felt good.

"It took that kind of courage to confess to me....."

*Especially since it was to the same gender?*

*Or is a confession something that requires lots of resolve in the first place?*

*You have to muster all of your courage, but you can only hope that you succeed. Is that "love"?*

At that moment, the phone's vibration function started up.

It was mail.

The sender, Aoki Yoshifumi.

*"I will respect the decision that you make. But, as I thought, I like you, Yui. I want to have a lot of fun with you. Not in a weird way! (That's important) Sending you a message in the middle of a date is against the rules, but I really wanted to tell you that. Sorry."*

It was a mail without any emojis.

Yui looked over the text again three times.

Aoki has said that he liked me many times. He has confessed to me so many times.

He doesn't get discouraged even after being rejected, and he keeps trying again and again.

A thought occurred to Yui, and she opened the contact list on her phone.

She felt guilty about talking with someone else while she was on a date, but she pressed the button anyway.

*"Yui?! What's wrong?! What happened to the date?!"*

Aoki voice could be heard from the receiver.

A little too loudly.

"Hey, I'm going to ask something a bit weird, will you hear it?"

*"I'm open to Yui's favors every day of the year, any time, anywhere!"*

Aoki surely has a refreshing, full smile on his face right now.

"When you say you like me, what kind of feeling do you have? .....Sorry for asking about this kind of thing."

The voice in the receiver was silent for two breaths.

*"Is this a serious question?"*

"Yes, it is."

Another pause that lasted two breaths.

*"I don't usually look that affected, but the truth is that I'm really nervous. That's because I'm saying 'I like you' to the person I like. If that person seriously rejects, then what should I do..... I'm scared of that. What Yui really thinks..... I don't know."*

"Ahh---"

*With Aoki and even other guys, we were all in the same boat.*

*No one knows what other people are thinking.*

*It's an obvious fact. Gender doesn't matter here.*

*Seriously saying "I like you" is scary for anyone.*

*But by mustering courage, this can be overcome.*

*That is "Love".*

*There's no way I will understand it all.*

*But I do understand something.*

"But then," Aoki started as his tone changed to a bright one.

*"Above all, there are fun parts too! How should I put it, this thrilling, mind-blowing sensation! A life without a wildly racing heart is boring, isn't it! Something like that."*

*That was somewhat laughable, Yui thought as she grinned a little.*

"I understand, thanks."

I had no idea what I said "thanks" for. That word was probably packed with various thoughts and feelings that I wanted to transmit to Aoki.

*"You're welcome. Uh, I don't know what that was useful for though!"*

*.....Except that I think he didn't get it. What a disappointing guy.*

"Again, sorry for asking about weird things. Bye bye..... Just wait a bit more."

"Eh? What was the last thing you---"

Not wanting to get a return call, Yui turned off her phone and put it into her

pocket.

Not long after, Oosawa ran back.

Yui stood up.

She looked straight at Oosawa, whose eyes had become slightly red. It was suddenly difficult to breathe.

"Sorry..... for suddenly crying."

"Ah, me too. I asked something I didn't know the meaning of, and then....."

After exchanging apologies, in the crack of the moment, Yui let her words slip.

"You know, I have something to talk about."

Oosawa's face stiffened, but she seemed to have resolved herself soon after. She said "yeah" and nodded.

"You know, I..... have androphobia."

The CRC members were the only ones who knew about it in school, but she was fine with telling Oosawa too.

"Huh?"

An astonished expression rose on Oosawa's face.

"A while back, something happened. From then on, I was afraid of being touched or in extreme cases, being approached by a man."

"That, that's....."

"Ah, don't look so sad! I'm alright already. The truth is, thanks to a certain boy, it recently became a lot better. So I suppose you could sort of say that I "had" androphobia..... I think. Now I'm only slightly scared of males, I think?"

*I really think that I've become like that.*

"That's why, until now, I hadn't dated anyone. I've also never fallen in love. Regarding the problem that my androphobic self was ill-fated for love, I avoided and escaped from it."

*Always, always.*

"I've never thought about why 'love' and 'romance' exist."

Even though a person who said "I like you" was always, always beside me.

"I also didn't even accept the feelings of the person who said 'I like you'. It was impossible..... Using that as an indulgence<sup>[11]</sup>, I didn't even properly face him."

Oosawa was silently listening to Yui.

"And even though everyone each had various thoughts for me..... I....."

I thought I was supposed to move on after the androphobia goes away. Even so, I still naively continued living in this peaceful atmosphere.

"You know, I just noticed that today. It was really too late but thanks to Oosawa-san, I have finally noticed it."

*Thank you for that. I conveyed that message to Oosawa, who kindly smiled.*

"I don't know what 'like' or 'love' or 'romance' is. But from now on, I want to properly face them. Properly face them, and think about them."

*I shall stop running away and deceiving myself.*

*I shall respond to the truth with seriousness.*

"And then, I will at least be able to understand the feelings of Oosawa-san or other people when they say 'I like you'. At that time, I..... will want to date someone....., I think."

After saying that, Yui lowered her head.

".....That's why I'm sorry. The me right now still can't accept Oosawa-san's feelings. I don't want to make a decision with half-hearted feelings. I've probably been saying selfish and inconsiderate things, but sorry."

*I think I managed to say the things I wanted to convey.*

*This is the first step to properly facing something important.*

Yui raised her head and waited for Oosawa's response.

".....Umm, have I been rejected, I wonder?"

Oosawa made a strained laugh and tilted her head.

"Eh, erm, it's not about rejecting or not..... ah"

*Come to think of it, that was an extremely annoying answer.*

"Err..... sorry. We can't date, so it is a rejection..... But, It's not like I hate you, Oosawa-san..... errr."

Looking at Yui, whose mind had gotten really entangled, Oosawa giggled.

"Sorry, just kidding, just kidding. It's something you can't answer, so it's fine. I'll wait for Kiriyama-san to..... give an answer..... And more importantly....."

Oosawa had started out with an excessively energetic voice, but now it suddenly withered.

".....Is it alright.....if I am..... a girl?"

It was a weak, trembling voice.

".....Can I say it straight up?"

Yui asked. After a few seconds of silence, Oosawa replied, "Go ahead".

"I still don't know now."

I still don't know anything yet.

*But I don't want to use this ignorance as an excuse to run away.*

Oosawa's mouth was wide agape for a short moment.

".....And I thought I wouldn't even get an OK..... That answer was outside of my expectations."

"Right?"

A suppressed laugh spurted out from the two of them.

"Ah, but really, thank you. For seriously accepting my feelings. I thought it would be really awkward and that I would be laughed at, but....."

Oosawa sighed and loosened her cheeks.

"Kiriyama-san, I'm glad that I came to like you."

"Wait, wait, like.....!Like, you said.....!"

*Saying it to me again, it's embarrassing, embarrassing, embarrassing.*

*But at the same time, I'm--- happy?*

"I'll wait. Until you find an answer that you can accept yourself."

"Yeah, thanks. And..... thank you..... for saying that you like me."

Both of them held out their hands.

And tightly grabbed each other's right hand.

It was warm and soft.

At the same time, their chests felt hot.

*I'll never forget the feeling of this hand for the rest of my life, Yui thought.*



She quietly opened the shoe locker.

There was nothing but her indoor shoes.

Haaa, Yui sighed as she stroked down her chest.

Of course. It would be troubling if she received another love letter in a row.  
That would be an exception in an exceptional situation.

"Yui, morning."

"Oh, hmoi?!"

Yui jumped up and turned behind her.

Yukina stood there with an astonished face.

"Oh, morning, Yukina."

"Is it your habit nowadays to react with a weird voice when being called by  
your friend in the morning?"

"You're wrong!"

The two lined up and headed towards the classroom of class 1A.

On their way, when they passed by class 1C, Yui took a glimpse inside the  
room.



She was there.

It was Oosawa Misaki.

Oosawa was having a conversation with the class president of class 1C, Fujishima Maiko.

It looked like she was laughing happily.

"Hey, Yukina."

"What is it?"

"Today at lunch break, could you tell me about the boyfriend you are dating now?"

"Heh?"

"What, why are you looking so puzzled?"

"That's because....., don't you always really dislike that kind of topic?"

"Well, yeah, but..... It's fine, just tell me."

"Ha, hmmmmm."

Yukina placed her hand on her chin and smirked.

"Yui, You..... have fallen in "love", huh?"

"That, that, that, that's not it---"

"What?! Yui?! Love?! I think I just heard a theme I cannot ignore?!"

It was Aoki Yoshifumi.

"Don't get in my waaaaay!"

Yui used her bag and slapped Aoki under the chin.

"Gah!" Aoki moaned as he fell backwards.

"Come on, do you have to be so irritating in the morning!"

"You two are always the same..... So, you fell in love?"

"You're wrong!"

"But, your face is red?"

"Uh~~~~~"

"Ah, yes, yes. I totally get it. You don't have to struggle..... But it must be something like that, yes?"

"You're really wrong, I said!"

"What's with that attitude when you asked me to tell you about my love, huh? Well, it's okay, but then I'll thoroughly speak fondly of him~. The truth is, before, my boyfriend was---"

*What is "love"?*

*I still don't get it myself.*

*But it's undoubtedly something amazingly good.*

*That's because, when Yukina did a false start even though she was supposed to tell her stories at lunch break, her face was beaming and relaxed.*

# Inaba Himeko's Solo Battle



Walking through the front gate into the grounds of Yamaboshi High School, a

word flashed in my mind.<sup>[12]</sup>

Change.

That is what I would do, and I would do it today.

I looked up at the cloudless sky and noticed the fine weather.

It wasn't a bad day to start a new journey.<sup>[13][14]</sup>

The sight of my unchanging school unfolded in front of my eyes - that was what it was supposed to be. But today, I saw something off about the familiar school grounds.

Perhaps that was because my resolve to fight had hardened.

Or was it that I had already changed?

In the morning, I arrived to the classroom with time to spare and reached my seat.

Before my eyes were companions who belonged with me in the cultural research club, Yaegashi Taichi and Iori Nagase.

The three of us were supposed to proceed with a meaningless morning chat, as other people in the classroom were doing, but---

".....G-Good morning, Inaba. Starting from today, we will finally be able to have our usual school life, huh."

Taichi talked to me..... but in a somewhat awkward manner.

It was like he was embarrassed and his eyes were unwilling to meet mine.

Look over here, dammit.

I scolded Taichi in my heart.

".....T-That's right, but 'usual'..... has a weird ring to it."

Betraying my inner strength, the words that came out were weak and delicate.

"Why are Taichi and Inaba talking with their backs facing each other?"

Who told you to get so embarrassed? It's obviously making me embarrassed as well. It's definitely not my fault at all, it's all because of.....

"No, not really....."

Scratching his head, Taichi denied it.

"Come on. We went through a ton to terminate that guy's disgusting phenomenon. At least show some happiness... some ha-ppi-ness!"

Iori whined, and poked me and Taichi.

I actually didn't mind this. However, laughing wryly, I evaded Iori's attack with a disdainful air and spoke.

"Idiot. You're the same as usual....."

Yes. Iori really hadn't changed at all.

"S-Stop that, Nagase....."

Taichi complained, but he didn't look at Iori and instead intermittently glanced at me.

This guy's the same as usual too..... not.



It was a little after a week since Inaba Himeko had confessed to Taichi Yaegashi.

However, the bomb that was thought to blow the CRC's relations apart hadn't done any noticeable damage.

Even after the confession, the CRC still functioned as per normal.

In actual fact, because we had just been through that shitty "Desire Unleash" phenomenon, we didn't really have the space to do anything regarding love.

But now, with the disappearance of the unusual phenomenon, we could return to their everyday lives.

The fact that I had confessed to Taichi and declared war with Iori descended on me as an inescapable real world problem.

"Right, I'll give you a hint for the last question. Here the unknown variable X-"

Shutting out the droning voice from the teacher's lectern, I dove into my thoughts.

The first thing to do was to analyze the situation objectively.

Consider a girl who is on good terms with a boy and another girl. The boy and girl friends were so close that they were often asked if they were dating yet. The three of them were in the same class, same club, and had a relationship such that they always did things together. The girl in question supported the love between her friends. However, that girl also fell for the male friend. And then she decided to butt into their love, and declared her girl friend as a rival. She also confessed to the guy and sought to battle with her rival.

But since they were enemies in love, there was the other problem about how to preserve their friendship. So they decided to separate their love battles and other things so that their friendship wouldn't be destroyed.

Yeah, it was a pretty fucked up situation.

No matter how you look at it, it was way too convenient.

Would we really be able to reconcile in the end? And even if we could settle things peacefully, wouldn't some rifts still be left behind?

At that time, we were right in the middle of «Heartseed's» strange world. It was because of the abnormal situation that I was able to somehow forcefully push on.

Would it be the same in a normal situation without weird occurrences?

.....What the heck am I doing.

All I've been doing is complain, complain, complain.

Inaba Himeko's counterattack ploy shall begin..... yes, that's what I decided to do when I reached school.

Don't be naive, that way you'll never change at all.

I shall discard my "useless self" and be reborn as the new "Strong Inaba Himeko".

Alright, now I should list all the things I should do, or rather, the missions I have to undertake.

*(1) Somehow improve the awkward relationship with Taichi, and find a win-win solution as well as the correct direction of attitude to take. 「**Taichi mission**」*

It's not like we would avoid each other or were unable to converse, but my relationship with Taichi cannot be said to be smooth. Well, recently our relationship was something like "confessed and got turned down" and "got confessed to and turned her down", so I don't think there was a way out of that. However, I had to somehow do something about it quick.

Whatever the circumstances, it was probably too premature to suddenly deal with it.

.....This is just strategic thinking and definitely not me getting cold feet!

*(2) Find out how lori really feels about this. 「**lori mission**」*

"Don't give up if you like him," that was what lori had said when she was trying to light a spark in me. Even when we had fallen for the same person.

lori was trying to help my deplorably hesitant self break through the walls holding me back when she said things like "Good luck" and "We'll still be friends no matter what".

Thanks to that, I managed to mature. lori was probably satisfied with that, too.

But I don't know how she actually feels about the development of this strange love triangle.

Right now, lori is behaving as if she has forgotten about what had transpired that time.



If I hadn't been such a miserable idiot, I would have probably been able to go without lori's words of motivation, and I could have ended up with Taichi without any hindrance from lori..... Thinking about it, I'm starting to feel apologetic about it.

Furthermore, if there was another method for the pitiable Inaba Himeko to mature, lori would have chosen that..... I think.

In any case, lori and I were rivals in love.

But at the same time, we were undoubtedly close friends, too.

Now that things have calmed down, I have the duty to check on how lori feels about it.

And finally, assuming that missions (1) and (2) have been completed,

*(3) Find a balance such that the love triangle between Taichi, lori and Inaba is at an equilibrium. 「Love Triangle mission」*

To be frank, lori was presently in the lead by far (or rather, since I had been totally rejected, it can be said that I had already lost). Then again, the two of them weren't dating yet.

That still wasn't sufficient to declare the close of the game.

Yes, that wasn't enough. In other words, the game hasn't ended yet. That was an important fact of the matter.

Anyway, time is needed to change Taichi's feelings and make him want to go out with me. To secure that time, I'll have to maintain a balanced love triangle.

That's it for now, I guess.

Inaba took a short breath and looked up.

She noticed someone standing on her left.

Aren't we still in class-

"Uoohhhh!"

The one standing there was the person persistently occupying my mind at the

moment, Yaegashi Taichi.

Shocked by the unconsciously loud scream, Taichi retreated. I felt stares from the whole class.

"H-Hey, what's up, Taichi?"

"Ah, it's just that I'm supposed to collect all the quiz papers since I'm in the last seat..... wait a minute, Inaba..... it's blank?"

"Oh, oh crap....."

So it was all just about those quiz handouts!



Because I submitted a blank paper for that quiz, I received some unnecessary homework.

I also lost face and was laughed at by everyone for randomly shouting in class.

Having lost steam, I was feeling pretty down.

But I couldn't stay discouraged.

I had decided to change, after all.

The new Inaba Himeko is not weak.

So I shouldn't be feeling down now.

It's about time to begin during this break..... Mission start!

## 「Iori Mission」 Phase (1)

"Hey, have you heard anything from Iori recently?"

Even if I questioned Iori directly, I wouldn't be able to get Iori's true intentions out. That was what I thought when I decided to ask Nakayama Mariko, who was really close to Iori in class.

"What do you mean?"

"Have you heard that she's troubled by something, or finds it difficult?  
.....Especially in the area of her friends' romantic relationships?"

"Not really, nothing about her friends' romantic relationships..... although she did talk to me about what kind of present would make someone happy."

So she's planning to use an object to strengthen her foothold, huh. What a shrewd opponent.

"I can't think of anything besides that..... But more importantly!"

"W-What is it?"

"Isn't Inaba-san the one who's acting strange recently? Although Iori was weird too."

"Hey, that, that's not true at all!"

In actual fact, it was thanks to the "Desire Unleash" phenomenon that we were all acting out of sorts.

"Really? It somewhat seemed like you were emotionally unstable. Ah, come to think of it, both you and Iori were in some sort of danger in the first semester, right? Is that related? It was really hard to ask Iori..... but please tell me just this once, why were you all acting so strange? Come on? Please?"

Dammit, I forgot that Nakayama's such a talkative character who likes listening to and spreading rumors.

"It's nothing important, and it's not something I would tell anyone, either."

"So you won't tell me, huh~ Well, that's it, huh. Ah, could you do me a favor, Inaba-san? You're good at finding things out, right? Then could you help me with a small thing?"

"I don't mind."

"As expected, Inaba-san's so cool! Yo, handsome chick, you're just fab!"

Handsome..... not feminine..... cool..... but not popular with guys.

In the past, I might have liked that praise, but now I just don't feel happy at all!

## 「Taichi Mission」 Phase (1)

In the next break, I suddenly went to sit right in front of Taichi.

Taichi, who was in the midst of keeping his textbook, looked up.

"What's the matter?"

"I want to have a little talk with you."

"Oh..... I see. So, what is it?"

I said nothing.

"Didn't you have something to say to me.....?"

I still stayed silent.

I observed the circumstances.

Of course, saying nothing was a part of the battle strategy.

I wanted to find out Taichi's current attitude without influencing him with my actions.

Analyzing the current situation was the basis.

How would Taichi approach if I did nothing?

Taichi hesitated a little and started with some small talk.

"Er..... Say, recently..... it's gotten pretty cold, huh?"

And why are you speaking so bashfully?

"Yeah..... It's already December from next week, after all....."

.....But then again, I'm also the same.

## 「Iori Mission」 Phase (2)

During the lunch break, I met up with Kiriya Yui, who was in another class.

"What? You have something to ask me?"

It seemed that Yui just had her physical education class, for her chestnut-colored, long hair was tied behind her in a ponytail.

"Have you heard anything from Iori recently?"

Excluding myself, Yui is the only other girl in the same club as Iori. Since they had gone through unfathomable phenomena together, Yui was the one and only person Iori could share her thoughts and discuss with.

The probability that the two of them had talked about me or Taichi is decisively high.

"Heard anything..... We did talk in the club room, but Inaba would have heard it, right?"

"Besides that?"

"Hmm~ Nothing of interest to you, I think."

"Don't the two of you talk about romance?"

"R-Romance?! No, never, not at all!"

Yui wildly shook her head. Her ponytail was flying about with such force that it could become a dangerous weapon.

"I don't really talk about that with Iori..... But, er..... Taichi and Iori seem like they're dating, don't you think?"

"..... The game's not over yet."

"Hm, what game?"

"No, it's nothing. Hmmm, and I thought that you would converse with Iori about that, what with you and Aoki being as thick as thieves."

"T-T-Thick as thieves?! What are you saying?! We're not like that at all!"

"Alright, I know."

If Yui was a dead end, then it was probably the case that Iori hadn't talked to anyone regarding that case at all.

Just as Inaba was pondering about it, Yui clapped her palm and fist together as she hit upon an idea.

"Oh right, I just thought that I would bring this up. Erm, about the format of the CRC News, the laptop at my place is in pretty bad condition....."

"Hmm, I see. I'll do it, then."

"Eh, really? I can leave it to you?"

"It's nothing much, I don't mind."

"Great, thanks! I'll leave it in your capable hands."

After some more light conversation, Yui said, "See you after school," and left.

"Ah!" Yui, who was facing behind, suddenly exclaimed. It seemed like she had just remembered something.

"Come to think of it, Inaba, what about that preparation --- wah!"

Yui suddenly covered her mouth with her hands.

"What's the problem?"

With her hands still on her mouth, Yui slightly shook her head bit by bit.

"I said, what's the problem?"

Inaba asked again, and Yui finally released her hands and took a deep breath.

"Well, since Inaba usually does this sort of thing, so..... Ah, don't mind me! Really, don't mind me at all!"

With those strange words, Yui strode away quickly, as if she was running away.

## **「Taichi Mission」 Phase (2), 「Iori Mission」 Phase (3), 「Love Triangle Mission」 Phase (1)**

That day, Yui was absent from the club activities. Apparently, she had gone to hang out with a friend in class.

As Yui had said, "Because I kept turning down her requests during the phenomenon, and I don't want to trouble her and make her worry that I'm hiding from society or something."

During the "Desire Unleash" phenomenon, she had refrained from coming

into contact with people who didn't know about the situation, or in other words, non-CRC members. Now that she was free from those shackles, it was only right that she welcome being able to go out again.

Thanks to the recent strange phenomena that had occurred, the CRC's meeting frequency had grown by leaps and bounds, even though it wasn't actually compulsory for them to be present in the first place.

"Uuoohh, why isn't Yui here today~ And when she can now have a rendezvous with me in the club room, too~"

Aoki Yoshifumi was, as usual, being annoyingly noisy again.

"Rendezvous..... that's an obsolete way of saying it, right?"

Taichi murmured quietly, and Iori followed up.

"The way you're saying it sounds too round. It's vous, rendezvous.<sup>[15]</sup>"

Even when some of them are in the same class, that club room was the one place where they conversed the most.

That being the case, the game was going to be held here.

For Inaba Himeko, the club room today was not only a place for relaxation, but also a battleground.

"Tsk, if that's the case, then I'll just be studying today. If anything goes wrong, I'm not responsible for it, got it?"

"Why does it sound like you're going to do something bad....."

Taichi retorted again.

What am I going to achieve if I just listen?

I thought as I looked up from her laptop. It's time to duel---

"By the way, Taichi, what types of girls do you like?"

"Bufuh?!" "Buhah?!"

Two people choked at Iori's explosive assault.

"I can understand for Taichi, but why did Inaba spurt out too? Ahaha~"

"N-No. T-That's just....."

Having been suddenly hit by an arrow just when I was preparing for an attack, I was panicking quite a bit.

As usual, Taichi was stumped by lori's question.

"What type, that's quite difficult to say....."

"Then would you choose cute over beauty?"

lori released the next bullet in a flash.

"About looks, huh..... Based simply on my preferences, I guess I would choose cute....."

"Hm, the cute type, huh."

lori nodded happily while glancing in Inaba's direction.

The triumphant expression on lori's face appeared from time to time.

And that was when I noticed it.

lori was undoubtedly the cute type, and I would probably be categorized under the beautiful type. In other words, this question was.....

I see, so that's lori's style of battle. This is really..... interesting.

I was unconsciously taken aback by having my initiative stolen, but I can't afford to lose now.

"The beautiful type is good too. Even in later years, she would still have a mature appeal."

Inaba spoke without a moment's delay.

"Eh, do we have to take mature beauty into consideration?"

".....Ah, mature beauty..... certainly doesn't need to be considered, I think."

I was trying to appeal with the charm of the beautiful type, but it didn't seem to go well.

"Well, if that's the case, beautiful girls look old, then."

Again, lori fired off another salvo.

Don't panic. Calm down. Time for the counterattack.



"Look old, you say?! Don't you know the charm of maturity? Beautiful girls look good in sensible clothes, look clean and pure, and have a sense of stability that others lack! Compared to cute girls, they have a lower chance of deteriorating over time! Cute girls certainly look young, but if you reverse that thinking, then they look childish! That's right, they're just kids! Whoever likes them is just a dirty Lolicon<sup>[16]</sup>, right?!"

"I don't know why you're so passionate about this topic, or what you're trying to advocate, but being called a Lolicon just by liking cute girls is a little cruel, isn't it....."

"Eh? Ah? T-That might be true..... Sorry."

After I sincerely apologized, the club room quietened down and a strange pause developed.

Taichi and lori faced me, and even Aoki looked up.

The three of them had looks on their faces that seemed to say "What's up with her?"

It was really uncomfortable.

"W-What is it?"

I asked Taichi, who was directly facing me, but he muttered, "No, nothing at all" and averted his eyes.

What's with this uncomfortable situation?

After a brief moment, Aoki went back to his studying, and Taichi shifted his gaze back to lori.

"Anyway, why did you ask that question of that topic out of the blue? Don't ask weird questions, Nagase."

"It's not weird at all, is it? That was just simple conversation..... So next up, do you like the logical type of person or the emotional type of person, Taichi?"

"It, it's the logical type, right?! I'll admit that emotional types have their good points, but when you're thinking about the future, rational people would be good at dealing with family finances, living through life, educating kids, taking care of parents and preparing for a stable life in their old age! The logical type

can plan for saving money while considering the largest risks! If you're aiming for a sufficient life, then you should choose the logical type! You think so too, right, Taichi?!"

".....I'm asking Taichi, so why is Inaba answering? In any case, what are you saying?"

Iori said.

"Well, Inaba certainly seems like an emotional person now."

Taichi continued.

"Wait a minute, is it because the 'Desire Unleash' is still continuing, and that's why Inaba-chan's acting so strange?"

And Aoki dealt the finishing blow.

I'm now even being thought of as experiencing a weird phenomenon, even when I'm not. What in the world am I doing?

Utterly humiliated, I angrily bit down on my molars.

I'd wanted to persevere and take on the challenge, but it seemed like an awkward atmosphere would develop if I said anything under any circumstances, so I chose the path of self-preservation.

I silently stared at the monitor of my laptop.

Why? It was going badly. I'm so embarrassed. I'm tired. Also, I have a feeling that this might be the wrong approach.

However, I've decided to change myself.

There's no such thing as change without pain, I told myself.

Get psyched, and do it once more---

"Ahahaha!" "Hahahaha!"

Taichi and Iori suddenly laughed in a loud voice.

Since I hadn't been listening to their conversation, I was unclear about the meaning of their laugh, but they were clutching their stomachs as they laughed.

Their bursts of laughter were just dazzling.

The projection of that light caused a shadow to form within me.

It was dark and black.

The black shadow could not step into the light. It would be engulfed by the light and disappear.

Next to them, Aoki gave a comment.

"Hmm, as I thought Taichi and Iori-chan's like a matching pair. There's an atmosphere that only appears when the two of them are talking..... don't you think so too, Inaba-chan?"

Taichi and Iori, a matching pair.

And then there's me.

What about myself?

"..... Inaba-chan?"

Inaba could not give a proper response to Aoki's question.



The next day, as I was heading to school, I thought I saw a guy waving floppily at me, and it turned out to be Aoki.

"Hey, Inaba-chan. It's getting really cold in the mornings, right?"

"Yeah."

I gave a random, half-hearted reply, and the two of us walked towards the school gate.

Even though I was strongly giving off an aura which warned those around of my lack of enthusiasm in the morning, Aoki didn't seem to care at all, and continued chattering away. Because of that, I had to respond with vague answers in rapid succession.

"So I was hearing some weird noises like 'Bibi', 'Bibi'."

"Hm?"

"And then I tried changing my earphones, but that didn't work."

"I see."

"So I was thinking of getting a new music player. Any idea what's good?"

"....."

It had become annoying to respond to Aoki.

"By the way, Inaba-chan, do you have anything that you want~..... Ohoh?!"

Aoki's voice suddenly exclaimed in a strange voice and stopped walking.

It wasn't a bad idea to press him on that point, but I ignored Aoki and continued walking. He was really troublesome.

".....It was probably a mistake to ask directly..... Hey, Inaba-chan, wait up!"

Just like that, we reached the main gate just in time.

"Come to think of it, Inaba-chan, you were acting pretty weird yesterday. Any problems?"

Having been directly called weird by Aoki, I got a little irritated.

"What was weird? Why don't you try saying---"

I swallowed my words.

Reflecting on it calmly, I realized that Aoki's words were true.

I was certainly "weird" now.

And that was because I was changing<sup>[17]</sup> myself.

Shouldn't change cause differences that might be viewed as weird?

".....I was thinking that I have to grow up, so I decided to change, and that's why weird, or rather unfamiliar parts of me are appearing."

"Grow up, huh..... Of course you would change, but still..... Hmmm."

Aoki mumbled with a complex expression, even though I thought that he

would be agreeable with my answer.

"What is it? Is it inconvenient if I change myself?"

"No, not inconvenient at all..... just that, hmmm....."

Aoki was tilting his head vaguely until the end.



There's some ill feeling in my heart.

I can't clearly grasp its form, but I think its probably thanks to Aoki this morning, as well as yesterday's failure.

It was a fact that I was feeling horrible, but I have to stimulate myself. I can't stay at a standstill. If I do, I'll never change, and forever stay as the weak Himeko Inaba.

The battle's just begun---

**「Taichi Mission Phase」 (3), 「Iori Mission Phase」 (4)**

---Failure.



**「Taichi Mission」 Phase (4)**

Life is something that is beyond human control, I thought pessimistically.

As I thought, landing Taichi is really difficult for me.

Also, Iori's true intentions don't even have a sign of being visible.

I was highly determined to achieve my goal, and continued on with extreme motivation, but to her regret, that did not lead to good results.

While my missions showed no signs of progress, it was after school before I knew it.

I packed up my textbooks and pen case, then closed my bag.

Is it impossible for me to change?

Are humans immutable?

Just as I was traversing my thoughts for no particular reason--- I realized something.

Right now, it was really awkward between me and Taichi.

But thinking from the flip side, that wasn't the case until a while ago.

If so, then if I interact with him the same way as in the past, wouldn't he do the same?

While trying to have a romantic relationship with Taichi, it's probably not a good idea to revert back to their relationship as normal friends. That said, I thought that starting from "zero" wasn't a bad strategy, either.

I stood up from my chair and pushed my timid self to move forward. There are so many ways to approach this, so I should continue challenging the problem until I find the correct solution.

"Yo, Taichi. Since it's lori's duty to clean up the classroom, shall we head for the club room together?"

I spoke as if that much was obvious.

".....Okay."

"Tsk, what's with that low energy? Get it together, man."

Calm. Not getting worked up. As per normal.

What would I usually do?

"Heyy!"

I slapped Taichi on his back.

"Ow?! .....I-I'm energetic enough, so don't hit me! Or rather, I don't plan to be a slouch!"

Come to think of it, this was the first time I've touched Taichi's body since the day of the school field trip --- that day we touched each other's lips.

I realized that after that most intimate moment, it seemed like a distance had been placed between us.

We used to be closer in the past. That thought gave me strength.

And then we started an endless stream of small talk.

The two of us walked down the corridor.

It wasn't a bad atmosphere.

It seemed like a long time since Taichi dropped his nervousness around me.

It was a simple, meaningless conversation between friends that showed no hesitation around each other.

It was a peaceful, normal exchange that seemed to question the existence of our intimate contact and my confession.

If I enforced the reality that we were just friends, Taichi would respond favorably to that.

Taichi laughed enjoyably.

He seems to be enjoying himself.

Is it that Taichi wants Inaba Himeko to just be a friend?

As if there was any doubt.

It's obvious, isn't it.

Taichi said that he liked Iori.

And he mentioned that it would be troubling if he came to like me.

Troubling.

As a person more kind than anyone else, it would be painful for him to reject a friend, yet he would have no choice.

That's why he's bothered.

Taichi's saying that it's difficult for him.

Even so, I was doing my own thing while ignoring Taichi's considerations and kicking aside Iori's feelings.

Just for my own sake.

Is that correct?

I certainly can't say that it is.

Does Taichi even want me to change?

"---And that's what he said..... Mm? Hey, Inaba, why did you suddenly stop?"

Taichi turned around and asked.

"Ah..... it's nothing."

Once I had stopped, I didn't have the momentum to press forward.

".....Ah, I have something to do before going to the club room. You go ahead first."

"Oh, I see. Is it club-related? If there's anything I can help with, just tell me."

"No..... It's something I have to do by myself."

What are you saying? What are you going to achieve by running away? I cursed myself in my heart.

But then again, the wretched, weak self I had raised within me was gushing out, and I could do nothing about it.

**「Mission paused temporarily」 - Break**

I aimlessly walked into another school building. From the non-populous corridor lined with special classrooms, I looked down at the school grounds.

Haaa~, I sighed deeply.

"What the heck am I doing....."



Didn't I decide to fight with might and clinch a certain victory?

I'd thought that I should and need to become a stronger person.

That was for my friends who encouraged me, and more importantly, for my own sake.

But the person who was the main trigger of my realization that I should change probably didn't even wish for me to do so.

What should I do?

Before being distressed, should I aim to complete the missions that I formulated?

But right now, at the rate it's going, I can't see any hope for that.

What do I want to do?

What should I do?

What am I seeking---

"One lamb lost in love detected!"

"Fuh" I felt a half-hearted sigh behind my ear.

"Uoi?!"

Chills ran down my spine. Panicking, I turned around.

The bright sunlight reflected off a pair of glasses.

The hairstyle of that person revealed her forehead, making her cool expression conspicuous.

That person was the one called by the nickname "Love master" or some bullshit like that. She was class 1C's class representative, Fujishima Maiko.

Looking at her from up close, I noticed her beautiful skin and neat facial features---

".....Hey, you're too close!"

I lightly pushed Fujishima away.

"My, gratuitous violence isn't good, you know? Not to a girl, or by a girl."

"It's all your fault for being unreasonably close and saying 'Fuh' by my ear, you idiot!"

I even had goosebumps at that time.

"Well, that's because Inaba-san has become quite lovable recently."

"Yeah, right! In the first place, becoming lovable, that's just not me....."

"Look, your face is red and you're facing the other way."

".....Uh."

"I thought that Inaba-san was the type of person to hide her flaws and keep a poker face, but that doesn't really seem to be the case."

".....Uuh."

"A person thought to be a cool beauty showing her cute side..... that's so Eros<sup>[18]</sup>..... or should I say I appreciate it..... but at the same time I'm worried..... that you're being so moe."

"That last phrase is enough to make my blood boil!"

I shouted as Fujishima laughed, with the sides of her mouth twisting upwards.

I was being played. She's a person I'm bad in dealing with. (I would love to meet someone I can handle.) "So, what do you want?"

"My 'Love Evangelist Sensor' can detect the existence of lost lambs."

".....What's with this character?"

"The faithful will be saved!"

"At least throw a proper pitch<sup>[19]</sup> with your words!"

Fujishima's way too free-spirited.

"Let's leave the serious talk aside."

"You mean that you're setting the jokes aside, right? If you're saying that it was serious, then I'll give up on this conversation."

"You have something troubling you, is that right?"

She spoke with a dignified voice.

My heart, which had been slackened by that stupid conversation, was pierced through by that voice.

"No..... not really."

I responded after being at a temporarily loss for words.

It's not a thing I want to discuss with someone else.

"This isn't serious, but just a joke, so you can say it with lightly, with just a small pinch of truth or falsehood."

Fujishima said, and her expression relaxed.

Just like the snow which had gone through a long winter and melted off in small fragments as the signs of spring approached.

"You....."

Slackening, piercing and dropping.

It was perfect.

I understand that the classmate known as the "Love master" has been consulted many times.

My feelings were all seen through, and she had taken the upper hand.

I somehow lost my will to compete.

In the past, I would have desperately resisted, not wanting to recognize my weak self. But now was different.

"Well..... if it's just a joke."

With a wry smile, I told Fujishima my story.

After all, I was searching for an answer that I couldn't derive on her own.

"---In other words, you want to know how to make guys fall for you, right?"

"I didn't say anything like that! How and where in the world did you hear that?"

I did use some oblique expressions, so it might be slightly difficult to understand, but I definitely did not say anything of that sort! I was a little

touched just now, but to think that feeling was immediately broken!

"To put it plainly, the most effective solution would be a 'sex appeal operation'."

"Listen to me, dammit!"

"High school boys are nothing more than primates, so if you do it well, you'll land them easily. Oh, but don't become one of those easy girls that get cheated by sagacious primates."

"Like I said, stop steaming ahead!"

.....Although she does have a point, Inaba thought as she secretly stored it as a mental note.

"I've recently thought of an amazing idea, so I'll tell it to you, Inaba-san."

"Don't need that!"

"Really? Are you sure?"

".....Fine, if you want to say it, then just go ahead!"

Like I want to hear this crap at all!

Seriously!

"Great, then I'll take up your offer."

With a snort, Fujishima continued talking.

"Have you heard of the 'suspension bridge effect'? It's when the fear and excitement of being on a suspension bridge is mistaken for love. Putting that to practical use, we can create a more effective feeling of agitation using a simple, ordinary situation."

".....How?"

"Say ahh'."

"Ah, Ahh?"

"Yes, you say that to a boy and feed him. As long as the girl in question isn't a quiet, unsociable person, it is impossible for a guy to experience that and not feel any excitement."

Hm.

"I should say that the excitement will be amazingly strong. And it can be easily mistaken for love."

Hmmm.

"Furthermore, when the girl says that, the boy would think something along these lines: 'Does she like me?' That would further increase his anticipation."

Hmmmmm.

"And if he's a virgin, you'll have it in the bag!"

Fujishima clearly announced, as she puffed her chest with pride and self-confidence.

"Remember, when he's a VIRGIN!"

"That's not what you should emphasize!"

"The delusions of virgins are scary, so be careful! ☆"

"You're the one who's scary! And what's with that anime voice near the end!"

Fujishima was more of a pervert than I'd expected.

Fujishima stared fixedly at me, and commented with a straight face, "Yup, that's a good retort."

Anyway, it was time to get back to the matter on hand.

"But it seems hard to wait for the situation where I can say, 'Open wide'."

"That would depend on the efforts of the person in question. No matter what, you have to put in that much effort, since it's for your own love."

My own love.

"I believe that this is discovery derived from Ohm's law<sup>[20]</sup>. I call it the 'Open wide law'."

"As if such a law exists!"

She's really too willful.

"Fuu. Anyway, it would be good if you can regain your spirit and revert to

your usual feeling."

And then, I unintentionally said this softly and gently.

"Fujishima....."

That's what happens when I'm unprepared. Seriously.

"..... That was an amazingly beautiful conclusion."

"Right?" Fujishima said as she propped up her spectacles coolly.

"But what do you mean by usual feeling?"

I asked about a phrase that I didn't get.

"Up till a while ago, you were weird in various ways, weren't you? You even had an argument with Nagase-san. Although, you are still continuing your weirdness."

"Continuing my..... weirdness?"

I'm "weird", just like I was thought to be during the "Desire Unleash" phenomenon?

"Yup, you're weird."

"That's because I decided to alter, to change myself."

"Alter..... Character change..... Who's sake are you doing it for?"

The degree of light caused my figure to be reflected on Fujishima's glasses.

"Who's..... No, it's for myself."

I said, and Fujishima left with a knowing face which seemed to say, "I see, then that's fine. Good luck with your troubles."

After parting with Fujishima, I tried motivating myself again on her own.

In any case, there's nothing to be gained by idling around. I would try with all my might to convert the fuel Fujishima had thrown in into my driving force.

I had probably reset my weakened heart, but just barely.

It was a shock being told that I was weird, but..... No, there's no point in

recalling unnecessary things.

I arrived at the club room, being slightly late.

I opened the door.

As she entered the room, lori's voice immediately plunged into her ears.

"Not really, Inaban might look unfeminine, but that's just a facade, the other side of her is unexpectedly girlish --- Oh, Inaban?!"

"What, you were talking about me?"

In response to that question, lori, Taichi, Yui and Aoki looked down and returned to whatever they had each been doing before.

"Oi, what's up?"

"Oh hey, Inaba. You're late."

Taichi replied.

"By a bit."

I reached my seat.

Everyone did not make eye contact with me. It was as if they were all hiding something from me.

What, am I an outcast now?

.....I'll force out of someone the information of who started this---

I scanned her surroundings.

The other four members escaped from her gaze.

Force the information out of someone. The usual Inaba Himeko would undoubtedly do that, but.....

I did not do it.

Instead, I started the boot up sequence of my laptop.

I had decided that I would change. However, it wasn't going well, and I was even called weird. Furthermore, there was a good chance that the person I wanted to understand didn't want me to change. Also, the surrounding

situation was starting to become strange.

It seemed like it was all going downhill.

My thoughts are becoming more negative by the minute. It's no good. It's a bad habit. I really have to stop that.

But while I understood that, I couldn't stop my thoughts from proceeding in a negative vector.

As a result, alongside the missions that were still in progress, I made no headway on the things that I wanted to do in the club room.



The next day, the sky was refreshingly, perfectly clear.

After a good night's sleep, the negative trajectory of my thoughts had been largely reset.

With willpower, I propelled my troubled, hesitant self towards the day after tomorrow.

It is still too early to give up. The execution of a plan wouldn't be smooth sailing.

With another change in attitude today, I set about my mission.

## 「Taichi Mission」 Phase (5)

"So you do this problem like that, got it?"

I was sitting on the table in front of Taichi, and helping him with his studying.

"Hm, I see. I move this number here..... got it. And then I substitute, right?"

"Isn't it simple?"

"Indeed, now that I understand it..... Thanks, you were great help."



There's something more important that you should be understanding, I grumbled deep in my heart.

Right now, I've taken up position on a table, and I'm crossing my legs.

In other words, my legs are right in front of Taichi's eyes.

Moreover, the skirt I'm wearing today is a little shorter than usual.

To top it off, I wasn't wearing leggings.

Of course, I wasn't going as far as a panchira<sup>[21]</sup>, but this borderline feeling was considerably..... great (Based on Inaba Himeko investigation).

I would (absolutely) never go along with Fujishima's ideas, but this strategy to make the target excited and conscious of me wasn't bad, I thought.

The distance between me and Taichi was still unfathomable. However, to close the distance with an easily manipulated friend like Taichi, the critical point was to cause him to be aware of me as a "female".

But then this guy was hardly looking up at all. Does he really like math that much?

I wonder if I should change the way I'm crossing my legs.

But then like this, it might only be for a brief moment, but my panties would be completely seen in a "glimpse".

As I thought, that would be too..... whatever, if I can use this to win the game---

Shift.

Taichi looked up at that moment.

But then he looked down immediately afterwards.

It was only temporary, but I'm certain that he saw it. So he did notice me. And I believe it was effective.

Taichi scratched his cheek with a somewhat red face.

"Erm..... Inaba?"

"What's up?"

I asked in an amorous tone.

".....I can see your panties."

"So you were looking!!"

I roared and delivered a solid kick to Taichi's face.

Taichi was left bleeding from the nose (He apologized to death afterwards).

## 「Iori Mission」 Phase (5)

The state of affairs won't change by doing slow and tedious things.

If an attack on the surroundings won't work, then all that's left is to do a direct confrontation.

"You're asking me about whether I feel disagreeable about 'Inaban coming to like Taichi and trying to steal him away'?"

Iori gently rephrased the question that I had thrown at her.

"Yeah, that's about it..... but isn't that too direct?"

I had phrased the question obliquely, too.

"Eh~, but doesn't Inaban always say 'I prefer to be straightforward rather than be indirect'?"

"That's true."

I couldn't help thinking that my position with Iori has been reversing in recent times. Iori is really becoming stronger.

"Right? Right? So, ummm, about whether I dislike it. Don't worry, that's not the case at all. Taichi's not my possession, and it's not like we're dating, so there aren't any factors for me to despise it."

"But then....."

"Didn't I say that it's fine on the day of the school outing? Or was Inaba's words just a lie that time?"

".....As if I would lie about that."

If I look back on my life, I can't think of any other experience when I clashed intentions like that.

Indeed, at that time, I'd managed to break through my thick shell.

"So you'll fight fair and square?"

"Iori, you're fine with that?"

"Yep. I actually find it reassuring that Inaban is here..... my choice wasn't mistaken, I think."

After saying those words, Iori's face seemed to slightly cloud over.

"What was that about?"

"What, indeed?"

Ahaha, Iori laughed blankly.

While she was just laughing it off, Iori also seemed to be laughing at the bottom of her heart.

She's certainly a person whose true expressions are impossible to read no matter how hard you probe.

"And that's how it is, Inaban. The two of us should talk about romance some time. Stuff like how to get the person you like to look at you."

"Even though we're enemies since we like the same person?"

"We're not enemies, we're rivals. Right?"

"Rivals..... huh."

There doesn't really seem to be a difference, but.....

"Enemies crush each other, but rivals spar against one another and become stronger. It's great to have a rival!"

Iori made a peace sign, and presented a gentle smile.

"So that's it. Inaban was concerned about that, and that's why you were being 'strange', right?"

"Eh.....? Strange?"

I've been called weird once again.

If it's because I've changed, then I should be content with this.

But for some reason, I feel that I'm mistaken. While it can be said that I've changed, there haven't been any signs of results.

"Mm, don't you think so? You've completely forgotten something important. Although you might be doing it on purpose."

"Important thing?"

"What? Have you really not noticed? Ahh, then never mind. It's nothing, really."

What the heck?

Is something going on without my knowing?

"Even if you say it's nothing, of course I would be curious."

"Leave. It. More importantly, about our agreement to go to the store and return the clothes together, on second thoughts, I'm fine on my own."

We've certainly talked about this before.

"I see. No, I think I should go with you. It somehow seems insecure if you go alone."

"Ah~, there you go treating me as a kid again~"

When I realized it, the topic had already changed, I was caught up in lori's pace, and I couldn't bring the conversation back to its original flow.



It's good to motivate myself and treat the things I should be doing as "Missions".

However, no matter how much you plan your strategy, it's meaningless if you can't execute it.

The 「Taichi Mission」 and 「Iori Mission」 didn't go as I had thought they would. (Regarding 「Iori Mission」, it has in a sense succeeded, but I'm somehow not satisfied with the result.) Therefore, I can't proceed with 「Love Triangle Mission」.

I can't be greedy, nor can I cling onto it. Devising strategies and schemes and using them freely is my way to fight.

Is that premise perhaps misguided?

Is it right to alter myself even more, be greedy and fight while clinging desperately onto that plan?

Change, be changed and cast aside the person I've been up till now.

Cast aside?

As I had that thought, my feet were suddenly caught in unsteady apprehension.

I opened the club room door.

Again, I'm the last one to arrive today.

"That's why, as I thought--- Ohh?"

Aoki, who was in the midst of talking, held his tongue.

And at the same time, Taichi, Iori, Yui and Aoki, who had been looking at each other, turned their bodies away in sync, as if they had planned the timing beforehand.

I felt unsteady.

My feet were trembling. So was my brain. I had an attack of dizziness. These were all hallucinations.

However, the fact that the place where I belonged had become unstable was not part of my imagination.

It's changing. That's why it's moving, and as a result, unstable.

Therefore, that's why, but.

What is this? I wanted to scream but I couldn't.

What do I do after confirming that this instability is real?  
Sit down while feigning indifference and start up my laptop?  
I was trying not to think, yet my brain revolved at breakneck speed.  
What exactly is it that the four of them are discussing and not telling me?  
I linked bad ideas with negative associations, and my delusions advanced.  
Is my confession to Taichi and declaration of war to Iori being seen as a problem? Were they having a discussion about how to deal with me?  
Of course, those guys aren't the type to talk about that.  
I know that, but still, I feel insecure.  
I've been told that I'm the rational, logical type, but I don't think that's true at all.  
I'm the furthest from that description compared to everyone else.  
Inaba Himeko is the type of person to doubt even when she knows it doesn't exist, feel insecure and sink into the depths of instability alone.  
Ahh, I've become genuinely useless.  
Once again, I felt unstable.  
I now don't know what attitude or action I should take.  
I should change --- What should I use as a stepping stone?  
I have to change --- And seriously start from zero?  
I must change --- I just must.  
If I do change, then what of Taichi, Iori, Yui and Aoki?  
That day, again, I made no headway with the things that I wanted to do.



The next day, I didn't even feel like attempting a mission, and was in a daze

throughout the morning.

I thought about what to do with each problem.

However, I couldn't come up with a single meaningful answer.

The school day passed in a flash and it was time to head to the club room.

When I briefly looked at Taichi and Iori, she noticed them whispering secretively to each other.

When they noticed her line of vision, they quickly pulled apart. Smiling, Iori lightly hit Taichi's shoulder and left the classroom first.

I was about to leave the classroom, when Taichi approached me.

"Inaba. Wait a moment."

Taichi was standing in my way.

".....What is it?"

My voice naturally became soft.

"No, I mean, there's something I want to talk to you about."

"Can't you tell me while walking to the club room?"

"I-I can't do that. How about you take a seat?"

"Like I said, what is it?"

I was gradually becoming irritated.

This guy was the origin, or main culprit.

Of my recently becoming sappy.

Of my footing becoming unstable and indecisive.

All because this man didn't go out with Iori.

All because this man was kind to me.

All because I--- fell for this man.

Take some responsibility.

I thought irresponsibly.

"What the heck is it?!"

I unkindly pushed Taichi away, and tried to move forward.

"Y-You don't have to be angry. So, just wait a while."

"Anyway, if you've something to say, just spit it out already!"

"Alright, I know..... So don't walk to the club room!"

"It should be fine while we're walking."

"No, it isn't. It's something important, after all."

Something important.

I suddenly stopped moving.

And turned around to face Taichi.

"What ..... is it?"

I looked directly at Taichi and asked.

Taichi took a deep, distinct breath.

"Ah, errr, I mean....."

I looked down awkwardly and said nothing.

What's with him?

He made it out to be something important, but in the end it seems like he hasn't thought about it.

Do you know how much meaning your words and actions have?

Do you know how much they mean to Inaba Himeko?

"Are you trying to---"

At that moment, a jaunty tune randomly drifted from Taichi's body.

"Whoops! Did I forget to set it to manner mode<sup>[22]</sup>?!"

Taichi hurriedly retrieved his mobile phone from his pocket.

"Aoki! .....Yeah..... Are all the preparations done? T-That's great..... But I think it's going to be earlier than planned---"





"Happy birthday Inaba!" "Happy birthday Inaban!" Four voices cried out.

Urged by Taichi, I entered the club room, and at the same time, the sounds of crackers filled the air.

For a few seconds, I stopped thinking and only stiffened.

Happy.....?

Birthday.....?

The club room was decorated with chains made from color paper rings.

It wasn't splendorous, but I felt a pang in my heart.

"Hey, what's wrong, Inaban? Aren't you going to at least say something in an excessively touched voice?"

Iori let out a mischievous, ecstatic smile.

"In the meantime, why don't you come in, Inaba?"

Taichi lightly pushed my back, and I stumbled forward.

My brain was still not operating properly.

"Let's get right on with the presentation of the presents~. Hoi!"

Aoki removed the lid of a box on the table.

*HAPPY BIRTHDAY! HIMEKO!*

The first thing that hit my eyes was the words on the white chocolate board placed in the middle.

Strawberry. Kiwi. Orange. Peach. Melon. Pineapple. Blueberry.

It was a whole cake with a chocolate cream base and a cornucopia of fruit jostling for space on top.

The fruits, which had been coated with nappage<sup>[23]</sup>, shone radiantly like jewels.

Or rather, they shone more than any jewel.

Dazzled, my field of vision became blurry.

"When did you get this.....?"

It didn't matter, but I asked anyway. And although there was something I should have said first.

"As planned, I dashed out after class to pick it up."

Kiriyama announced with faint pride.

"Rather than a dash, it was more along the lines of godlike speed, right!" Aoki said.

"That was a great help. I didn't manage to successfully execute the delaying tactics you were talking about at first....."

Taichi took a quick breath.

"Well, we did predict that Taichi wouldn't be able to effectively stop Inaba."

"So that's how much trust Yui has in me....."

"Don't worry about it. So, Inaba. I know that you don't like to be called by your given name, but since we're writing on a cake, I thought that it wouldn't be cute if it wasn't your given name....."

"No, it's fine..... anyway."

I didn't tell them that she was actually overjoyed.

"Oh~? Is Inaba perhaps crying~?"

I was facing the floor, but was peeked at by Iori from below.

"You, you fool! Who's crying.....!"

Looking to the side, I wiped my eyes on my sleeve in one quick move.

I'm not crying. Not crying at all.

Since tears aren't leaking out, I'm not crying.

"Look, Inaban is pleased with things like this, right? Inaban likes practical goods, so it'll be good if you give them to her, won't it? Understand, Taichi?"

".....Yeah, I'll use this for future reference."

So this was it.

The penny finally dropped.

So that's why everyone was recently so secretive and furtively talking between themselves.

"Anyway, how long are you going to stand around for, Inaba? Are you too surprised? .....Don't tell me you seriously forgot your birthday?"

I didn't reply, but Yui had hit the nail on the head.

Come to think of it, my family had reserved a place at a restaurant for dinner. I had thought that it was rare for my family to gather and eat outside. So that was it.

Why did I forget my birthday after having lived sixteen years in this world?

Once again, Iori turned towards me.

"Hey, Inaban? You don't seem like yourself recently. Well, lots of things have happened, but....."

"Not like myself..... in what aspect?"

Although I've been called 'weird' so many times.

"It's like you're trying too hard, or steeling yourself too hard, and your field of vision has narrowed, you know?"

My field of vision has narrowed. That's certainly true.

Recently, I haven't been properly seeing my surroundings. It seems that I've been failing at single-handedly mimicking a wrestling match<sup>[24]</sup>.

But then.

"I thought I would change. Become stronger, .....and become a better human being."

She said, and Iori spurted out.

"Inaban's already usually a good-natured person, what are you trying to achieve by becoming more than that?"

"But I'm far from 'good-natured'."

"If you weren't a kind person, when I was about to return the clothes, you wouldn't have said that you were worried and wanted to tag along."

"Ah, and come to think of it, you also agreed to listen to Nakayama-chan's request," Iori added as she flashed a wry smile.

"You also helped me with my studying without a reluctant face."

Taichi said.

"Didn't you say that you would help do my part of 'CR News', too?"

Kiriyama went with the flow and spoke up.

"Me too..... Ummm..... I-I can't come up with any good examples, but you've certainly always taken care of me!"

Aoki continued as the last person.

"You were always causing trouble and having Inaba clean up for you, and you can't think of any examples?"

Kiriyama flatly delivered a verbal jab to Aoki.

"Ahh, there's too many, so I don't know which one to say? Something like that, hahaha," Aoki joked. Beside him, Iori opened her mouth.

"Of course, I don't think changing is a bad thing, but is it really so dramatic? And Inaba, I've only known you for about half a year, but you've been changing naturally, right?"

I've been changing naturally?

"Back in the past, you would have said something like 'The information is the weapons I've gathered, so I can't reveal it so easily.' and refuse to help Nakayama-chan, I think."

Even without thinking about changing, that's exactly what I've been undergoing.

But right now, the me who is trying to force change has her gears all out of sync.

It was probably thanks to those dramatic events that the feelings rose from the heat of the moment and pitched forward.

That said, I'm genuinely no match for her, I thought.

She's fragile but strong, and she can't understand her own feelings, but she can see through others' hearts.

Iori is really unfathomable.

I even felt that while it seems like I know her, I don't understand her at all in reality.

"Yeah, so Inaban, hurry up and take your seat! Time to prepare the candles!"

"Wait a minute, Iori. Aren't open flames banned in school?"

"Eh-, it'll be okay if it's just for a while."

".....Well, I did get candles from the cake shop."

"As expected from the one who can read the situation, Yui!"

"The unworthy Aoki Yoshifumi will be in charge of starting the fire, then!"

Everyone started preparing the candles clamorously.

"Inaba."

Not joining the rest in the preparations, Taichi approached me alone.

With a quiet voice, he started talking.

"You said all that, but I haven't had that kind of experience, so I don't know what kind of attitude I should be taking..... Sorry, that's just an excuse."

It was the first time Taichi spoke up about that since that intimate contact and the confession.

That had never faded.

It had remained in Taichi's heart.

"You don't have to apologize, Taichi. I was selfish and only cared for myself,

and I only made things awkward....."

"But I personally like the relationship we had before. I really felt at home with that. It would be good if things could continue to be that way, I think..... I don't know how you think about that, so I can't say that I want it to be like that."

"Ah....."

My voice unconsciously leaked out.

I had thought that I must and will change.

Even so, ignoring my own existence and only focusing on the resultant change isn't a good thing.

It's meaningless to change until the good traits that Inaba Himeko holds, those things that I should keep, are completely altered as well.

"Good" traits.....

I do have some of them too.

I just have to believe that.

There's no such thing as a human being composed of only undesirable elements, after all.

I should have more confidence in myself.

Everyone should have a good side that they shouldn't change.

"Inaban!" "Inaba!" "Inaba-chan!"

Iori, Yui and Aoki shouted.

"Let's go, Inaba!"

Taichi said, and my right foot stepped forward.

This time, I will firmly step on the ground and advance while being confident in my own abilities.

I had probably rushed too much. Indeed, I did lose sight of myself.

I'll probably also fail like this many times from now on.

If one can succeed no matter what after just making one decision, no one

would have hardships in life.

You make a resolution, and that's just the beginning of a long, winding journey.

It'll never be quick or dramatic.

But slow, steady, one step at a time.

That's the right way to walk forward.

There will be a time when you want to abandon the mission. There will come a time when you get sick of everything. You will probably also hesitate at a particular point in time, and stray from the proper path.

But then---

"Alright, the preparation of candles are complete! Let's sing, on the count of three!"

At Iori's signal, everyone put their voices together and sang the birthday song.

---But if there's someone beside you.

Perhaps its time to begin Inaba Himeko's Counterattack, in my style, in a way that only I can perform.

The birthday song ended.

The club room was filled with the sound of claps and cheers.

Along with the flaring determination, I blew out the sixteen candles.

# Pentagon ++





——I failed the entrance exam of the public high school I had planned to

enroll into.

Even though the passing rate for the mock exam was around 80% when it was the best high school in the district.

I don't think that I wasn't competent enough. I was just unlucky.

Speaking of which, one of the fellas in my cram class whose grades were overwhelmingly worse than mine seemed to have been admitted by chance.

It was seriously tough luck.

In the end, I settled for Yamaboshi Private High School. I've heard that it's a school judged to have a fairly competitive promotion rate, as well as a good school ethos. That being said, I couldn't be excited about it.

It was grey right from the start.

I thought it was quite fitting for me, in a sense.

Weren't most people's lives like this too?

...Or so I thought, when two coincidental coincidences coincidentally joined forces, and a strange situation transpired.

Was it coincidental? Or was it predetermined?

The people I encountered there gleamed with a certain brightness that irritated me.

So glaring that I wanted to puke.

So these kind of people do exist after all.

People who glimmered like fools in this faintly corrupted world.

However, those kinds of people are almost certainly bound to end up like me.

In other words, they would slowly be corrupted. That was normal.

But there are those rare individuals who would never be degraded. I knew that quite well myself.

Those who were born blessed with incredible luck.

How would these people end up, I wonder.

And why did I feel that they were gleaming?

It was unbelievable. It felt puzzling. It was a mystery. I wanted to understand it.

And then perhaps, once I had grasped the answer, I could also become——  
No, not at all.

What nonsense was I thinking?

Of course it wouldn't work out like that.

No way, impossible.

.....But I—— wanted to know.....

.....Yeah, that was it. I merely wanted to know. Nothing more.

I really, definitely wasn't yearning to be like that.

Nope, definitely not.



I want to change when I become a high school student, I thought to myself.

This must be what they call a debut in high school.

Debut. Hmm, I like the sound of that.

I'm not exactly trying to become anyone brilliant. I know where my limits lie, after all.

But I thought that it was a good target to look up to, even for just a while.

A drama-like world.

A manga-esque universe.

Those are realities far away from mine.

I wouldn't mind even if I couldn't become the protagonist of that world. I just

wanted to become a resident in a corner.

Come to think of it, I only managed to maintain such resolve for the first few days of school. Before I realized it, I had returned to my usual position.

The surprisingly same, exact point.

Would I stay like this forever and ever?

It might be so. My designated role in the world had long been determined.

I know that very well.

In the end, someone like me should just stay at where I should be.

The world cannot be changed.

The world won't change.

Well, the world is incredibly huge, after all.

From the world's perspective, I was but a micron<sup>[25]</sup> in size.

A puny person like me would just be washed away, unable to step up to center stage.

Yet, a person like me was still able to discover such a scene.

It was dazzling.

I had never thought I would be able to see something so bright.

The dream I had imagined on my own was right there in front of me.

I was shocked. Astonished. Could it really exist? I thought it was just a falsehood.

And then, I recalled the dream I had given up on. Perhaps it could come true, I thought.

If I could join that place, that is.

No, no. Not me.

I don't have the right, nor the worth. I can't bring myself to destroy that world.

No no, but.

But, if I could..... Ah, it's no use! What am I thinking?

Not me. Really.



She tapped the table rhythmically and moved her pipe chair with a creak.

She then flipped opened a manga. She closed and put it down immediately, but picked it up again just as quickly.

She turned her head around, and stared at the club room door.

"Nagase..... Relax."

Yaegashi Taichi said, and Nagase Iori promptly spun her head around.

Her hair, which extended down her back, streamed through the air. The sight of her silk-like hair fluttering seemed like it could be used for a TV commercial.

"Mwhat, Taichi! You made it sound like it like I'm being all fidgety here!"

".....Aren't you? And you bit your tongue just now, didn't you?"

"D—Did not."

"Nope, pretty sure you did."

"Taichi is so scary today~! Stop bullying me~!"

Nagase dropped flat on the table and buried her head in her arms.

The tied hair at the back of her head, which had been a trademark when she was a first year student, was nowhere to be seen.

The long-haired Nagase seemed a lot more mature now, both in appearance and spirit.

However, her cheerful, childlike demeanor had not changed at all. This made Taichi realize once again: That was Nagase, after all.

"Of course we'd be curious, Taichi," Aoki said. "After all, we're talking about our first new club member-Not to mention, since this is a 'surprise reveal', we

don't even know what kind of person he or she is."

Aoki, who had his arms crossed behind his head, stretched his lanky frame and entered relax mode.

"T-The new student still hasn't decided to join the club, though!"

In direct contrast to Aoki, Inaba Himeko responded tensely.

It's worth mentioning that Inaba was Taichi's "girlfriend", and had been going out with him for over a month.

At the conclusion of that hectic club presentation event, as well as «Heartseed»'s "Sentiment Transmission", which ended around the same time, Taichi and Inaba began their relationship as lovers.

As everyone welcomed the arrival of another spring, Taichi and Inaba welcomed the spring of their lives as well.

"You don't want new members, Inaba-chan? Weren't you saying that you wanted them yesterday?"

"Well, I did say that..... But if the person coming today is a cute loli, then..."

".....Then?"

Aoki inquired, and a curious Taichi listened in as well.

".....Wouldn't Taichi, the lolicon and sis-con, go after them?!"

She's worrying over something peculiar again.

Ever since she and Taichi started going out, Inaba was infected by an odd disease (Nagase called it the Dereban syndrome). Its frequency had been cooling down lately, but it would relapse like this from time to time.

"There;s a limit to needless anxiety. And..... I'm neither a lolicon nor a sis-con!"

*This is important, so I need to emphasize it. You can mistake me for anything but a lolicon. And although I would shamelessly proclaim that my sister is the cutest thing and I would go through fire and water for her, but..... I'm definitely not a sis-con!*

"R—Really?"

Inaba peered at Taichi.

Her semi-long straight, black hair slanted to one side. Her eyebrows were raised nervously, but the long eyelashes on her slit-like eyes and her dignified facial features, gave her a mature, beautiful aura.

*And she seems to be looking prettier by the day.*

However, Taichi couldn't really bring himself to say that out loud quite yet.

"Of course. I mean..... I'm starting to prefer the 'mature beauty' type lately... I'm weak to the cute, confident smile they always have, or rather..... In other words..... Inaba is..... Er....."

It was certainly an embarrassing situation. Taichi still could not bring himself to look straight at Inaba's face.

"Heya——!" "Wugh——?!"

His head was caught by someone and forcefully spun leftward.....

.....To look directly at Inaba's face.

"Why~ Now~ Stop shying away like a little girl, Taichi-kun! Man up and say it in her face!"

The owner of the voice ringing from behind his head was of course, none other than Nagase.

When Taichi and Inaba first started going out, Taichi used to think that they had to be mindful for Nagase. However, Nagase's response was "Screw that! Too much hassle!" and they had soon returned to a normal relationship.

So much had happened between them, which was why Taichi was truly grateful that Nagase was willing to remain good friends with him.

.....That being said, Taichi wasn't quite sure what he should do right now.

"W—What you mean 'Man up'?! Lemme go!"

"C'mon! Stop moving your head around. Look at her in the eyes and say it properly!"

Approximately fifty centimeters before him, Inaba was blinking.

Each time Inaba blinked, Taichi's heart too, would jump a little.

"What am I supposed to..... No, I mean....."

*I should stop hesitating and running away.*

*I know very well what I should say,* Taichi prompted himself.

"It's alright. I..... think Inaba is the prettiest."

Comments like "Woah~ Nobody asked you to be that straightforward, you know..." could be heard in the background.

In front of him, Inaba's eyes widened briefly in surprise, and then she beamed innocently like a little girl who had received a mountain of sweets.

".....Mnh ♥"

Thump thump.

Taichi was not sure why, but he felt his heart started racing uncontrollably.

"Gwah?! This is the destructive power of taking 'Dereban' at point-blank range.....! I can feel the advent of Renaissance within me, and it's like Fujishima-san is doing all kinds of things to me....!"

Nagase had completely lost it.

"Oi, could you release the headlock about now?"

"We'll worry about that later! Comrade Aoki! Is it done?!"

"Yes it is, Captain Iori-chan! I have recorded the entire scene just now on my phone!"

"Wha— Didn't I tell you to stop doing that?!"

Taichi protested, but the voice above his head replied.

"Shut up~ Taichi! We've been watching you two being all lovey dovey and going all mushy and cuddly every single day! Where are we going to vent our frustration if you don't let us tease you a bit!"

"It's alright, Taichi. After a bit of editing, we'll make it into you two's personal 'Love Diary' and send it to you as a present~"

"It is NOT alright, Aoki! Lemme go already Nagase! And Inaba, do something!"



"Really~ Stop it already~ Lovey-dovey~ And love diary too~ It's not like that~"

*Gah, it's no use! Inaba's in her soppy mode and can't do anything!*

Taichi lamented. There wasn't another sane person left in the room.

"Is Kiriya not here yet?! She said she'd bring us a new member!"

Taichi called out for his last shred of hope.

On the edge of his field of vision, he could see Aoki nodding in agreement.

"What's the matter, Aoki?"

"Hm? Oh, I was just thinking 'Taichi has finally come apart——' in my head."

"Come apart?"

"Well, isn't Taichi really dynamic today~? Or should I say, the loudest and most energetic in this room?"

*Dynamic? Do I really look that way?*

As Taichi was still trying to comprehend his statement, the club room door swung open.

*They're finally here,* Taichi thought and turned around.

At that same moment, Taichi recalled the developments yesterday that led to this situation.



"The new students ain't coming---!"

On a day near the end of April, the Cultural Research Club president, Nagase Iori, exclaimed.

Sprawled on the sofa in the club room, she seemed to be in a bad temper.

*Like usual..... or actually, more so than in the past, she's a person with an abundance of emotion.*

*My admiration for that figure probably won't change at all,* Yaegashi Taichi

thought.

"And we thought that five or six students would come to check us out too..... that forecast was too optimistic, I think."

Kiriyama Yui released a sigh and twirled her chestnut-colored ponytail. It seemed that she had left it as it was since her Physical Education class.

"Including today, the deadline for club application is in five days! Only five days! Not even a week~!"

Nagase punched the sofa irritably.

"As I thought, just fliers won't cut it....."

"You trying to say that my plan wasn't good?"

Inaba Himeko muttered.

"No, no, I don't mean it like that, Inaban. Everyone agreed to it, after all."

"But isn't zero a pretty bad result? If that's the case, we should do something to attract new students....."

Aoki was making a suggestion when Kiriyama interrupted him.

"That's a 'no'. We can't just overturn something we just decided on."

"The rest of you might want this, but I'm with Kiriyama on this one."

Taichi asserted his agreement.

The new school year had arrived. Taichi and the rest had graduated from first year to second year students.

Some class changes had been made, and there were some events for this new school year that they had to take care of. And the largest one that spanned the whole of April was the first year students' Club Admission.

In Yamaboshi High School, where joining a club was obligatory, this event was more dramatic compared to that at other schools.

The Cultural Research Club, which was going into its second year since its establishment, was welcoming the club canvassing period with sweat and tears, like all other clubs.

To that end, the CRC had decided on two policies.

First, they wouldn't proactively approach and invite students to join their club.

Second, they would only stick leaflets on notice boards and submit a few lines introducing the CRC for the public Club Information Pamphlet.

Kiriyama opened her mouth.

"I don't feel right drawing in new students to a club that doesn't have a clear goal. And more importantly..... there's «Heartseed», right?"

The mysterious existence which had dragged the five of them into strange phenomena, «Heartseed».

They were afraid that «Heartseed» wouldn't just target the five of them, but extend his reach to the whole CRC.

In case of the latter, if «Heartseed» appeared, someone other than the five of them would probably be dragged into the mess.

They could never proactively invite anyone into this dangerous environment.

But they still wanted new members. Besides, they strongly believed that being their usual selves was the best strategy to return to their everyday lives. They didn't recall «Heartseed» ever causing trouble to their private lives, and even if a student joined the CRC, it wasn't guaranteed that «Heartseed» would expose him or her to the same phenomena. On the other hand, «they» might lose interest because it ceased to be just the five of them. Then again, it was certainly possible that someone new might draw «Heartseed»'s attention. But would «Heartseed» even appear again? «They» might be bored and leave..... and the unresolvable discussion continued endlessly.

Finally, Inaba summarized it with "Don't actively recruit or reject new students."

"But then again~ Are you really fine with zero new members~? I'm not exactly disagreeable with spending this year with you guys and without any juniors, but don't you find it a little lonely?"

Aoki concurred with Iori's view.

"I sure wouldn't want the foundation we laid down to go to waste! I would also want to pass it on to generations of students."

Taichi also understood that feeling. It was quite the turn of events at the start, but right now, he felt a sense of belonging to the CRC. He would be satisfied if it could live on for a long time.

"It's also my dream to play around with soft, cuute junior girls!"

Kiriyama said, and Inaba continued.

"Yeahh, come to think of it, I would like to have an errand boy. Yup, definitely want one."

"Kiriyama's reason is somewhat in the mainstream, but yours is way too irregular."

"And now, let us leave aside Taichi's absolutely boring remark."

"Wow, you sure spewed out poison there, Nagase."

Taichi said, and Nagase cackled enjoyably.

"Well, let's leave that, too."

"Heck no, let's not."

*She sure is high up on the freedom scale.*

"So what about you, Taichi? Do you want new members?"

Nagase questioned.

"Eh? Ahh, about that....."

Taichi started, but his next words were momentarily stuck on the tip of his tongue.

".....I expect it would be interesting if a new person came in."

"So you seem like you want some juniors, yeah?"

"No, not that way." Taichi denied Aoki's suggestion.

*Even while I'm saying no, I do look like I'm quite against the idea,* Taichi thought.

"Hey, Taichi, is that so?"

Inaba also asked.

"That's not what I'm trying to say."

Taichi had intended to say that line more strongly, but he couldn't find the energy to.

"If that's the case..... ah."

Inaba suddenly blushed, and pressed a hand near her mouth.

"I see..... It's true that when new members come in, the club population would increase and there'll be less chances for me and Taichi to hang out. Taichi didn't like that, so....."

"Dang it! I thought it was getting better recently, but the Dereban Syndrome has relapsed! How else would you explain this!"

Nagase delivered a witty remark.

"Well, isn't it natural to explain it with the variable of love? Eheh."

"Is your head filled with sweets or something?!"

"That would be nice~ They're sweet and they melt..... just like love."

"Inabaaaaaan?! You usually take the stance that food is for gaining nutrients, but now you're making fun of sweets?! You may be in Dereban Mode, but your character has changed way too much!"

Observing the flustered Nagase, Taichi could help but let out a comment.

"Your character has changed a lot too, Nagase. Since when did you become the straight man....."

"That's because you aren't giving the retorts! Since Inaban perished, I'm unable to handle everything by myself! And it doesn't help that Yui and Aoki are such teasing characters<sup>[26]</sup>!"

"Why did you group me up with Aoki?!"

Kiriyama stood up and yelled.

"Now, now, Yui, you don't have to be so embarrassed when you're with me."

"And you don't have to give a positively foolish explanation like Inaba!"

"What do you mean by 'Inaba perished'? I'm still alive!"

"But then when you're in Dereban status you lose all trace of Inaba, don't you~"

It was completely out of control.

*It seems that I have to do something here.*

"Everyone calm down! If we go on like this it's like a ladder match<sup>[27]</sup> where none of us are down yet, but everyone is scrambling to get up the ladder and in the end, we get hindered by someone else and take damage..... Ah, that wasn't a good example. Sorry, I'll try to think of something else---"

"We don't need this foolish pro-wrestling example!" The other members shouted in unison.

*.....But I wasn't fooling around. Urgh.*

After regaining their composure, the CRC restarted the conversation with Inaba at the helm (Apparently out of that soppy state).

As expected, the CRC couldn't do without Inaba managing them.

"So for now, we want new members, but due to those circumstances, we can't actively recruit them. No one has any objections to this direction, right?"

All four other members nodded in response to Inaba's question.

"So everyone's in agreement again. This means that we can't really do anything."

Nagase sighed.

It was already the last third of April. Most of the new students would have decided on a club or even joined one already. And for those who hadn't decided yet, the club observation period had ended. This brought an end to the temporary enthusiastic calls for new members and distribution of flyers.

Everyone groaned, including Taichi.

Inaba broke the silence that followed.

"I guess all we can do is return to our starting point....."

"Return to our starting point?"

Aoki parroted Inaba.

"Don't you remember how this club was formed?"

Taichi recalled the events in the past.

A year ago, the five of them didn't join existing clubs. They were the people who were forced out by the rule that a club cannot be formally recognized without at least five members.

These people banded together, and the Cultural Research Club was formed.

".....I see. We could get those kids who haven't yet joined a club, or those trying to join an unrecognized club....."

Nagase nodded in agreement.

The starting point of the CRC was a gathering spot for people forced out of unofficial clubs.

"Then it would be for the good of those students, too. But how do we even find them?"

Taichi muttered. "Ah," a voice escaped from Kiriya's voice.

"What's the matter?"

Inaba asked.

"There's a kid who's in the same dojo as me, and that person just entered Yamaboshi High School..... and in the same situation we were in one year ago."

Click! Nagase snapped her fingers.

"That's it, Yui! You should definitely call that kid over!"

"Eh, I don't know if that kid would be willing to join our club..... That character's<sup>[28]</sup> quite difficult, but not bad or anything!"

"I would make allowances for weird fellas. We were in the same circumstances last year, and we agreed not to talk about it, right?"

Nagase eagerly said, and Aoki followed.

"It'll be fine calling that person over once."

"Whether I can make that kid run errands or not..... is a different issue from whether he or she would join the CRC."

Inaba openly revealed her true intentions.

"You okay with that, Taichi?"

Taichi replied to Kiriyama's question.

"Me?"

"I did call your name, so that is obvious, isn't it?"

"Ah, ahh..... I guess."

*I wonder why, but I've already decided on my answer, yet I can't speak it aloud.*

".....Of course. I'll bring that person here tomorrow, then."

"It's decided, then! We're counting on you, Yui! Speaking of which, what kind of person is that kid? Boy, or girl..... No, don't tell us, I think it would be more interesting if it's revealed tomorrow---"

Taichi could hear Nagase's high-spirited voice, but it somehow seemed to be far away.

Five days until the deadline for club registration.



The clubroom door opened.

However, a human shape still couldn't be seen.

"Here, come in. 'I'll just go home'? No such option for you!"

It seems that Kiriyama and the new student she brought were having a dispute.



"Come in, I said!"

Kiriyama's face could be briefly seen. She was pulling on someone with both hands.

The four other members in the clubroom held their breaths and watched the doorway.

Boy or girl? They didn't even know that. Good student or rebellious teen? What appearance, hairstyle, personality and preferences does that person have? Why didn't he or she want to join other clubs?

"Ey!" Kiriyama exerted her strength, causing the other person to lose his balance and reveal his figure.

He had a small frame similar to Taichi's, and while he was thin, he had a balanced physique, probably because he was practicing karate. He had an asymmetric, neat hairstyle --- and he was a guy.

".....Ah, nice to meet you."

The boy listlessly lowered his head.

His sharp eyes gave the impression that he was displeased. Some would say that he had an unpleasant look, but it could also be said to be imposing. Besides that, he was well-featured and seemed to give off an androgynous feel.

Also, while he had only enrolled a month earlier, his uniform seemed to be worn stylishly.

"Oh, what a handsome guy."

Nagase's line summarized their thoughts.

It all depended on personal taste, but many people would probably judge him to be cool.

"No, don't say that. I oppose to being called that by the senpai rumored to be the cutest in the school."

He said in a low, cold tone.

"You don't like it..... but since when did that rumor spread to first-years?!"

"Some time."

"I see-, since I grew out my hair I've been praised as more mature-looking, so I can see how that happened."

"Wow, you accepted that so easily."

Taichi retorted, while Nagase laughed and said, "Just kidding, just kidding."

"Heey Yui! How long have you been holding that guy's arm?!"

Seemingly disconcerted, Aoki raised his voice.

"Eh? Ah, sorry, Chihiro-kun."

"Yui! You should be apologizing to me, right?!"

"Why do I have to apologize to you? You're so annoying, too."

".....T-That icy stare!"

"Is this all the club members?"

As if evaluating them, the boy surveyed all of them and asked Kiriya.

"Yup, all five of us."

"Hmmm."

The boy nodded with a mysterious expression on his face. It seemed like he was planning something..... or maybe not.

Slam! A noise came from behind Taichi. It seems that Inaba was hitting the table.

"Oi! The first thing we should do is sit down and greet each other! Stop being stunned and prepare the tea and snacks!"

"What a family head."

Taichi mumbled.

The CRC went ahead with the self-introductions.

"I'm Kiriya Yui..... but since we've been together in the dojo for so long, I guess I don't need to introduce myself. Iori, can you continue?"

"And I'm Nagase Iori. Just saying, I'm the club president here. And as you

know, I'm a beautiful girl, yay!"

"It's amazing how she can say that with a straight face," Taichi muttered.

"Next, Aoki Yoshifumi! My motto is 'It's alright as long as it's fun!' And you..... tell me your relationship with Yui later! If it turns out that we're rivals,..... then we'll battle like men!"

"Starting with a threat right off the bat, huh," Taichi murmured.

"Inaba Himeko. I know a lot about computers and laptops. And to Yaegashi Taichi, who's next to me, I'm his..... wife."

"Wife?! You're admitting that much?!"

It was a shocking truth.

The guys listened to everyone's self-introductions without any particular reaction.

"Next up is Taichi."

Taichi came to his senses after being called by Kiriya.

"Ahh..... I'm Yaegashi Taichi and I think that pro-wrestling is a kind of art. Nice to meet you."

"Woah, that's the proud face of someone without a shred of doubt! He's done it again!"

Nagase was delighted for some reason, while Taichi felt he was being played for a fool.

"Right, the next person is Chihiro-kun."

"Eh-, I am Uwa Chihiro. I was forcibly brought here by Yui-san. I hope to get along with all of you."

Uwa spoke plainly and lowered his head.

"There's a little more to say, isn't there?"

Kiriya prompted. Perhaps because of their senior-junior relationship at the dojo, Yui was behaving like an elder sister now.

"Not really. Mmmm..... Well, I've been going to the same dojo as Yui-san

since we were kids. If I had to name a hobby, it would be listening to western music. My grades are above average..... that good enough?"

He spoke without any passion, as if he was just getting it out of the way.

"Hmph, we're especially giving you a club introduction, so get it together!"

"I didn't ask for that, though."

"But didn't you say that you were in trouble because your homeroom teacher advised you to hurry up and choose a club?"

"I didn't say that bit about me being in trouble."

"This kid's not cute at all, huh.....! Even though his face can be said to be cute or cool."

Inaba muttered after witnessing Yui and Uwa's exchange.

"Yui's male-targeted charms have finally appeared! But watch out, she's a follower of fads, so it'll be quite costly falling for her!"

"Don't say that! It's not male-targeted! It's normal, just normal!"

Judging it to be an endless conversation, Nagase ended it and turned to ask Uwa a question.

"So Chihiro-kun, what do you think after seeing us? And are you fine with me calling you Chihiro-kun?"

"Right....."

Uwa averted his gaze and scratched his cheek.

"Anyway, the level of the girls here are really high, that's what I think. Why don't you gather some new male members? That's what I was thinking, but then I guessed that it would be difficult for guys to enter, since the level's too high."

"You're saying that it's difficult to enter because the bar's too high? Is that really a thing?"

"Right now, I'm thinking, 'Is it alright for someone like me to be here?' Something like that?"

"No no, nothing to do with that at all."

".....Well, I don't know about that person over there."

Fu, Uwa's eyes narrowed as he snorted.

Nagase was quite disdainful at that reaction, but a smile returned to her face soon after.

"Well, we don't even appeal to new students with something like 'Please join the CRC!'"

"So, because of that you're worried that you can't gather new members?"

"Mmm, there's lots of reasons for it, but that's pretty much it,ahaha."

"Hmmm..... But really, I find both Nagase-san and Inaba-san to be high level. Come to think of it, I've heard the rumor in class about 'two legends in the same club'. By the way, Nagase-san's my type."

"Ohh?! I never thought that Chihiro-kun would be the kind to say that directly!"

Nagase exclaimed with a joking expression and raised her hands.

Kiriyama timidly asked a question.

"Say, Chihiro-kun, regarding the rumor about Iori and Inaba being in the same club, what does it say about me....."

"I don't think you're in it."

"Eh?! A, ah, I see. Mm, it's fine. I totally don't care about it at all. I can't compare to those to at all, totally."

"That's because Yui-san's just a munchkin."

"Munchkin! Did you really just call me a munchkin! You did! Right?!"

"To tell the truth, Yui-san is the subject of some rumors."

"Uehh?! What? What do they say?"

"They say that you're made fun of by me, Yui-san."

"Y-you bully~~~!"

Those two were really close.

Aoki watched those two with a grim face. Countless times, he tried opening his mouth, but gave up soon after. Finally, he managed to move his struggling body.

On an emotional level, he would want to break into their conversation, but doing that would make him seem immature..... that was what Aoki looked like he was thinking about.

*Aoki sure has it rough*, Taichi thought with some sympathy.

Inaba asked.

"So, why haven't you decided on a club yet, Chihiro-kun? Is it because there's a club you initially wanted to join, but it couldn't gather five members and have it officially recognized?"

"I was actually thinking of joining the Karate Club."

"So why didn't you?"

"Mm~..... It went roughly like this: It was pretty low-level, so I said 'I won't join practice, but I'll be in the register and be a phantom member', but then they replied with 'You looking down on us, boy?'"

"Of course they would."

"I didn't say it directly, though. And I went through all the trouble of beating around the bush, too."

"You weren't strong enough, then. Did you come up with a proper plan? Well, first---"

"Stop trying to pass down your vicious methods, Inaba."

Taichi interrupted.

Kiriyama opened her mouth.

"Since that dispute with the Karate Club, he didn't visit other clubs, saying that it wasn't worth the trouble, and then I invited him....."

"And I said that you don't have to read too much into it. It'll all somehow work out in the end..... And I've said it many times now, but I was dragged here

by Yui-san."

"But you were quite eager to come in the end, right? Especially after I said I became strong again because of this club."

"All I said was that I would go and take a look once. And that was because you were so insistent."

"Hey! What's with that?! I don't know you anymore!"

"Right, then I'll be off."

Uwa stood up, and Yui panicked.

"Ah! Wait, wait! I was just lying!"

"Just kidding."

"Hmph~~~~~!"

It seemed like they would continue like this forever if you left them alone.

"Ah-, if you continue at this rate for the whole year, your calory intake will go through the roof, Yui!" Nagase laughed as she wolfed down snacks..... *Wait, did she just polish off more than half of those by herself?*

"It's time to stop! Yui and Uwa!"

Finally unable to let it slide, Aoki interrupted them.

"Now's not the time for the two of you to be talking alone, but the time for all of us to open our hearts in our first meeting!"

"T-That's true."

"Right! The two of you still have time at the dojo..... since that's all the time they have..... no, no, it's fine! The bond I share with Yui is so strong that it won't be hindered by anyone else..... Yup, it's good..... All good, hahaha!"

Even the usually positive Aoki had such a negative sentiment.

"Surely there won't be storms down the road, right....."

"Stop mumbling about these scary things, Taichi! I'm feeling totally blessed right now!"

Inaba cleared her throat.

"So in the end, do you have the intention of joining our club, Uwa-kun? If you don't, then I won't force you to..... With that impertinence, he wouldn't make a good errand boy, anyway."

"Oi, your dark motives are leaking out again."

Since she started honestly expressing her feelings, Inaba has become extremely loose-lipped.

After hearing Inaba's question, Uwa looked away and went into his thinking pose.

".....I'll have to join a club some time, I suppose. That's why I don't like private schools, but let's not go there. Based on what Yui said, I also won't be forced to attend....."

After brooding for a while, he lightly spoke without any particular feeling.

"I will positively consider it, then."

Since it was a confusing answer that they couldn't fully grasp, the CRC members, including Taichi, were unable to provide a decent response.

Looking at the state of the members, Uwa stood up.

"Right, I'll leave now. I have to go to the dojo today."

Hefting his bag onto his shoulder, he walked towards the door.

"That's kinda how it is, so I'm free to do whatever I want, right? If you're not fine with that, then say it early so I won't submit the club registration form."

Leaving those words, Uwa closed the door.

In the club room, which now contained its usual number of occupants, Yui directed a question to everyone else.

"..... As you can see, he does have a cutting personality..... What do you think?"

Four days until the deadline for club registration.





"Good morning Taichi!" "Morning Yaegashi-kun!"

The next day, when Taichi walked into the classroom of class 2B, he could hear two bright voices.

"Good morning Nagase, Nakayama."

The people who had greeted him earlier were Nagase and Nakayama Mariko, who had been in the same class last year and was on especially good terms with Nagase.

Nakayama was a lively girl with twintails, which was quite rare in this day and age. She loved to gossip and was always smiling, so she had a lot of friends. But she was also often too spirited, and Taichi disliked that about her.

"I just feel so excited after being greeted by Yaegashi-kun in the morning! Your voice used to be really calm and steady, but now it has some eroticism added to it, and it feels good! It probably happened after you started going out with Inaba-san, woot! Really, I could fall in love with you just because of your voice!"

"..... It's also great that Nakayama-san is so energetic in the morning."

"Ah, your face is saying 'This person's high spirits is such a bother'. What do you think, Iori?"

"Isn't it obvious? We'll just have to bring his tension up to our level!"

"Here we go! Rise~ Tension!"

Nakayama frowned and went into a pose to transfer her energy (or at least, with that intention). She had a serious expression on her face. *Now..... I don't really like this, but I should probably join in! Go with the flow!*

"Te-Tension!"

Taichi punched in the air with his right arm and shouted at a volume loud enough to seem healthy, but not loud enough to resound throughout the classroom since he would be really embarrassed.

At that moment, a group of two girls entered through the door.

The first had chestnut-colored hair fluttering in the air. That was Kiriya Yui.

The other person was Kiriya's best friend who was in the same class last year, Kurihara Yukina.

The tall-figured Kurihara, who had her hair dyed brightly in a wave, stared at Taichi coldly and talked to Kiriya by her side.

"Your friends over there are doing something weird so early in the morning."

"Friends? I don't know these weird people."

"I see."

The two of them hurriedly headed to their seats.

"W-Wait! I was just forced to do this by Nagase and Nakayama....."

"Ahh-Such great weather today!"

"Yup-"

Nagase and Nakayama were having a friendly chat with their backs turned to Taichi.

"Don't turn your backs on me after fooling around like that!"

*I'm being totally played right from the morning. Damn.*

"Haha, Yaegashi's really such an interesting person!"

Kurihara laughed. She gave off the impression of being really candid, and was a really good person.

"I don't try to be, though....."

"That's no good, guys these days need to have one or two interesting lines of conversation..... Ah, but Yaegashi-kun doesn't mind because he's all lovey-dovey with Inaba-san, right?"

"Lovey-dovey, you say....."

Since Inaba didn't try concealing any information, her dating Taichi was a publicly known fact.

*"It's totally fine, that way we'll be able to be lovey-dovey without having to worry about anything," was what Inaba had said earlier..... ha! So we ARE lovey-dovey with each other!*

Nagase raised her voice.

"Listen, Yukina-chan! I had to see them at it for the whole of yesterday, and I can't bear to watch anymore!"

"On that topic....."

Nakayama cut in.

"Who exactly has been reporting to me about their actions every time with a smile?"

"Uhh..... I've certainly been enjoying myself listening to the love birds' deeds."

"They aren't love birds..... Not yet anyway, right?"

Taichi looked up to see Nagase, Kiriya and Nakayama laughing at him.  
*What in the world.*

Kurihara spoke.

"My, aren't we all sticking together without any sense of fidelity? But it's fine, I suppose, since we're just having fun in the present. It has a temporary calming effect, too."

"Is that so?"

"Generally. It's the same feeling with my current boyfriend. Maybe we should break up."

With her abundant experience in romance, Kurihara provided some immensely useful information.

"I really don't like how you're so casual about this."

Kiriya complained with an unsatisfied look on her face.

"How long are you going to stay as an innocent maiden, Yui? When you're so erotic, too."

"Buh?!" Taichi couldn't help but choke at that bold assertion.

"I'm not erotic at all! Where did you get that fabricated information?!"

"Eh, weren't you staring at 'that' page in the magazine the other day?"

"Y-y-you're wrong, that is, I was thinking that the girl on that page was really cute..... anyway, it wasn't for erotic purposes!"

Nagase tapped the shoulder of Yui, whose face had turned completely red.

"Yup, Yui. I understand, now let's stop yelling about whether you're erotic or not so early in the morning."

"Eh? I..... wha..... whaaaaaat?!"

"Ummmmm, there are people doing revision, so let's be quiet."

Setouchi Kaoru, who had taken up the role of class committee chairman, clapped her hands together and approached them.

"Sorry, Kaoru-chan."

Nagase winked.

"It's fine, Iori. Anyway, you can still chat amongst yourselves, but try to lower your volume."

Setouchi was a girl who used to hang out with delinquents, dye her hair and had a deep enmity towards the CRC. But now she had transformed into a top student with short black hair. Her bright earrings were the only vestiges of her showy self of the past.

The CRC, including Iori, had already forgiven Setouchi.

"I want to encourage people who want to change," Iori had explained.

However, it seemed that Inaba, who still held a slight grudge, made Setouchi run errands from time to time.

Nakayama spoke with a smile.

"Setouchi-san, you're also getting used to your work, right-"

"Ahaha, I guess..... Thanks."

There were two candidates for Class 2B's committee chairman election.

Setouchi was thought to have an overwhelming disadvantage in the voting.

Despite that, there were sympathy votes from those who thought she was fighting a losing battle, and there were votes from those who thought that her class change<sup>[29]</sup> from delinquent to model student was interesting and decided to support her. Those extra votes added up, and she actually managed to clinch a landslide victory.

And then there was the person who tasted the bitter hardship from Setouchi's victory.....

"At first, I also thought that it would just feel weird without her, but unexpectedly, that wasn't so~"

Thud.

Taichi turned around when he heard the sound of a bag dropping on the floor.

Standing a short distance away was the losing party of Class 2B's committee chairman election. She was the ex-chairman for Class 1C, Fujishima Maiko.

Fujishima was purportedly more stylish than anyone in their year, but now her glasses were askew, and her hair wasn't done well.

Fujishima picked up her bag and stumbled over to her seat.

Seemingly without even an ounce of strength, she hung her head down dejectedly.

"Ah! I wasn't saying that Fujishima-san is no good! I was just saying that Kaoru-chan's working very hard!"

Nagase hurriedly followed up.

"It's alright, Nagase-san..... Someone like me..... wasn't the right caliber for the class committee..... Even when I was trying to hard to serve everyone..... but all that came to nothing....."

The former class president, who was even known as God of Love, was completely burned out after she met her Waterloo. She had been in this state for two weeks already.

Nakayama also twirled her pigtails and desperately tried to speak up.

"That's not true at all! There's no doubt that Fujishima-san was the best class president in history! You may have lost this time, but there's still lots of people expecting great things from the Master of Romance!"

"How did I lose if I'm supposed to be the best in history..... If I can't even be the class committee chairman, I shouldn't have the right to help others with their romance..... I'm neither a class president nor a master of love..... I'm just like your average classmate A.....Fufufu."

She gave an empty, meaningless laugh. Fujishima's wound was really deep.

And then Setouchi, the perpetrator of Fujishima's defeat, started talking.

"Um..... Fujishima-san? If you have that much zeal, should I let you have my position? It's not like I'm fixated on being the class president....."

After hearing those words, Fujishima's countenance suddenly changed into a fierce one, and she looked up.

"Who would want to accept your pity! Piss off!"

Fujishima slammed her table like a spoilt brat.

"That's too much of a character change....."

Taichi whispered to no one in particular.

*I feel like so many people's characters have changed, just after moving up one grade.*

*Is spring this kind of season?*

"And besides..... the one everyone chose was you.....! So the one to lead the class..... can only be you, Setouchi-san!"

"Fu..... Fujishima-san.....!"

The two of them shared a passionate handshake, and Fujishima used her left hand to wipe off her tears.

Kurihara spoke to Taichi in a soft voice.

"Hey, you used to be from Class 1C, right? I've been quite curious now, but

just how much did you all revere your class president?"

"You wouldn't understand unless you were in that class. With Fujishima-san's charisma and influence....."

Taichi stared into the distance. Kurihara, unable to fully understand, muttered a vague response. "So it was even more amazing than the rumors I heard, huh....."

Even after the handshake, Fujishima was still wiping off her tears.

Fujishima's passion for her former role as class committee chairman, as well as the thought that she was overdoing it weighed on Taichi's mind.

He wanted to say something.

"Fujishima."

".....What is it, Yaegashi-kun?"

She straightened her glasses and looked at Taichi's direction. Compared to her perfect aura in the past, she was currently full of openings. Her weakness now co-existed with the traces of her flawlessness, and she honestly looked cute.

"Back in year one, I was helped countless times by Fujishima-san. So with or without your position, I know that you're a great person."

".....I'm not great at all."

"No, you're amazing. You would always believe in yourself, do things in your own way, and it would work out perfectly in the end. So you have to believe."

*That sounded pretty embarrassing,* Taichi thought as he scratched his head.

"Ohhh, I see now! Your skin is so thick that you can deliver all these smooth lines in front of the general public, and you used that as a weapon to land Inaba! And with that voice and those words, it's too much..... Unyu?!"

As Nakayama was excitedly making a racket, Nagase pulled her twintails to shut her up (Seems like she can be controlled by her twintails).

"Yaegashi-kun....."

Fujishima gently opened her eyes and looked at Taichi.

Taichi had experienced this pattern of situation many times in the past.

Every single time, there would be a good atmosphere, and when he thought that the other person would correspond, he would be shrugged off with a joking attitude.

*That won't be the case this time. The usual Fujishima with her strength that knows no depths will return-*

"E-E-Even if you say that, I'm not setting any flags, got it? I'm not joining Yaegashi-kun's harem, you hear?"

*..... Eh? Her reaction was different from what I expected?*

Taichi was temporarily dumbfounded, but he soon realized that the statement was full of opportunities for the straight man.

"Anyway, what's with the flag and the harem?! When did I make that?!"

"I never thought you were such an easy girl to set a flag after that."

"I did no such thing."

Fujishima was like an impregnable fortress.

"But my heart did race for a while..... Thank you for that."

"Oh, what a great conversation starter. You're welcome..... As if anyone would say that!"

*What happened to Fujishima Maiko!*

*Her character's totally messed up!*

*Did she go into one of your weird moods again?*

"You have to wake up, Fujishima. Oh, and why does everyone look so shocked?"

At that moment.

Taichi's nape was caught by someone.

He was dragged backwards in that position by some force.

"Uoohhhh?!"



Pulled by a number of people, Taichi ran backwards to avoid falling down.

"What the..... heck?!"

He turned back to see another classmate, Watase Shingo.

Watase had a stern expression, although he had always been ecstatic to still be in the same class as Fujishima. The pointed wolf hair<sup>[30]</sup> of the upcoming ace of the soccer club seemed to be standing up more than usual.

And behind Watase was a collection of guys, all with the same solemn expression.

"Oi, Taichi..... what was that?"

"What's the matter with you, Watase?!"

"Why did you blend into that group of girls with that innocent look?!"

All the guys behind moved their heads vertically with amazing vigor.

"Why, I was talked to right as I came in....."

"That's not enough for an explanation! And all of them can be said to be cute, and you seem to be so friendly with them, and even with Fujishima-san.....!"

*So Watase's desperation was, as he had just announced without hesitation, linked to Fujishima, huh.*

"I was just caught in the flow..... and we were just talking, so it's fine, right?"

"But you're ignoring the friendship of us guys! We're so disappointed in you!"

"That's right," the other boys provided covering fire for Watase.

Strangely, the guys were all heated up.

*If this goes on, it would be really awkward.* Taichi tried to find a verbal solution to mollify his classmates.

And then he came up with an idea.

"But then didn't you ditch us last time because you were hanging out with a girl from another school?"

A refreshing, handsome lad from the soccer club, Watase was naturally popular with girls.

"Oh really....." "So you're together with Yaegashi!" "Unforgivable!"

Taichi, who had been surrounded by the ring of boys, was happy to see that Watase had been added into the center with him.

"No, no..... it's just a misunderstanding! .....Yaegashi, why are you doing this to me?!"

"I just told them the truth."

"But that didn't even help your case~"

Taichi and Watase were then jostled around by the group of boys.

Due to Watase's malignant betrayal, the boys focused their anger on him. Taichi had to endure some attacks, but thanks to that, he was released first.

"T-Thank goodness....."

*I have to thank Watase for being my substitute, Taichi thought as he headed for his seat.*

*It sure is really noisy right from the morning. Even when we're already second year students, we can still lead fun student lives.*

*It's great that so many friends and people I've had deep connections to are in the same class by chance.*

At that moment, Taichi's mobile phone received a missive.

He flipped opened his phone and noticed that the sender was Inaba Himeko.

"Just why..... why am I in Class 2D?! And what kind of karma is it to have only Aoki in the same class?!"

".....It's just by chance, that's all I can say."

*I mean, the timing of that message is way too precise!*



After school, the usual five people of the CRC gathered, along with the prospective new member, Uwa Chihiro.

Based on yesterday's events, it would have been thought that Uwa wouldn't come, but Kiriya had dragged him along again.

It seemed that he still had some intention to join the CRC.

"As I said, it's weird. Everyone's in the same class, and I'm all alone....."

The sulking Inaba grumbled.

"We got no choice, that's how it was decided."

*I wonder how many times I've witness this same exchange,* Taichi thought as he replied.

"Ahh~, I should have just done something on the back end....."

"Me too..... I can't believe that I got separated from my beloved Yui....."

Aoki cradled his head.

*How many times have I seen this exact scene?*

Iori spoke calmly.

"Well, looking at these two now, I think the god of class allocations knew that if they would be really noisy when put together, so He separated Inaba from Taichi and Aoki from Kiriya."

That was quite the acrimonious statement.

"I think Yui was also grumbling about it at the dojo."

"What?! Is that true, Uwa Chihiro?! No..... that wasn't grumbling, but just gushing about me, right....."

"How did you jump to that conclusion?!"

Kiriya quipped at Aoki's surprisingly positive thinking.

"Ah, that's right. We have to decide on nicknames."

The one who said that was Nagase.

"For a nickname, I would be fine if you address me without the honorific,

but..... then again, I haven't decided to join yet....."

"No, no, the way of calling you is important. For things like this, the start is the main point. Look at Taichi. He said to just call him by his given name, and we still do that even now."

"Sorry for..... er..... missing the timing."

After Taichi's apology, they went into deciding Uwa Chihiro's nickname.

After going through various suggestions, they decided to just use "Chihiro" in the end.

"Well, I'm fine with anything, really."

"Yui calls you 'Chihiro-kun', which is a good fit, don't you think?"

Inaban asked.

"As for me, I want to call you 'Chihhi'. Any other takers?"

Nagase said.

"Not me. 'Chihhi' just doesn't suit me at all."

"I think it kinda does recently..... ah, never mind. So we'll just use our own personal names for you, right, Chihhi?"

"I did say that I was fine with anything, but as expected, Chihhi is a little....."

"I can't think of anything else besides 'Chihiro-kun'."

"Chihiro, huh."

Kiriyama and Taichi spoke in succession.

Seizing the opportunity, Aoki gave a proposal.

"By the way..... since we're doing this, how about giving me a nickname..... no, I don't have my hopes that high, but how about at least calling me by my given name!"

However, his frantic appeal was useless, and his proposition was ignored naturally.

".....Why?!"

"You've already established yourself as that kind of character, haven't you?"

*Aoki's the only one who hasn't changed*, Taichi thought as he remarked.

"That's too cruel, Taichi....."

But while it looked like the everyday scenery, he felt like it was a different atmosphere.

It was probably natural, since six chairs were filled now, compared with the usual five.

But besides that, he felt that the outsider, Uwa Chihiro, was having a huge effect on the CRC.

Of course, Taichi also wanted new club members, and in no way did he detest the idea, but---

At that moment, someone knocked on the door of the club room.

Two knocks resounded, and the room fell silent.

Nervousness ran through the club room.

Aoki and Kiriya stiffened, while Inaba and Nagase had sharp glints in their eyes.

Only one person, Uwa Chihiro, had a curious countenance.

"Huh, it seems like we have a visitor."

Chihiro didn't know.

But the CRC members knew that the room gets almost no visitors, excluding themselves.

The only other visitor was the advisor for both the Cultural Research Club and the Jazz Band Club, as well as the homeroom teacher of Taichi's class, Gotou Ryuuzen.

And that Gotou Ryuuzen had been possessed by another form of existence in the past.

Knock, knock, knock.

That was one more knock than earlier.

Inaba exchanged looks with the other members, and finally spoke.

"Come in."

The door slowly, timidly swung open.

The first thing that could be seen was floating brown hair. Soon after, big, round eyes could be seen, and then a childlike face was revealed. The visitor had an adorable-looking forehead, and medium-length hair.

The person's body gradually came into view. It was a small frame like Kiriya's, and the oversized uniform around it looked soft and airy.

It was a girl who looked really cute and cuddly.

".....Umm?"

Nagase asked, let down by the anticlimax.

The girl in question straightened her back and stood at attention.

And then, after a couple of deep breaths, she gripped the bit of uniform near her chest, and decisively spoke.

"My, my, my name is Enjouji Shino! I, I saw a leaflet saying 'Observers welcome', so..... umm..... so if I could take a look..... please!"

The CRC was all in a frenzy after the arrival of the awaited observer.

"Here, hurry up and take a seat! There's a chair here..... or how about the sofa? It's usually sort of reserved for me, the so-called president, but you can use it too, alright? This is a huge service!"

"Hey, hey, why did you decide to come?! Was it really because of that cryptic flier?! Or did you perhaps hear about us from someone else? And you're so cute, aren't you?! Can I pet you?!"

Nagase and Kiriya were especially excited.

"Good of you to come with three days left~! Even though I'm the club

president, I don't really feel any sense of responsibility!"

"If you're here to observe, then that means you haven't submitted the club application form yet, right? You haven't decided on a club yet, right? Right?"

"Eh..... Ah..... Umm....."

The girl's eyes darted around like that of a frightened rodent.

"You two are bothering her. First let her take a seat."

Heeding Inaba's orders, the two of them said "Yes, ma'am" and retreated.

"Ah..... excuse m....."

As she was about to sit down on a folding chair, the girl's eyes met with Chihiro's.

Two seconds of silence passed.

"Ehhhhhhhh?! Why is Uwa Chihiro here?!"

"That reaction was too slow, and you were too surprised, Enjouji."

Chihiro answered as if it was a bother to do so.

"Oh? You two are acquainted?"

Aoki asked, and the girl nodded.

"Y-Yes. We're in the same class, and..... when, when we were arranging ourselves based on our names....."

The girl seemed really nervous.

*It isn't unreasonable for her to be that way, since she's just entered a room full of upperclassmen.* That was what Taichi thought as he kindly spoke.

"I guess you can be a little more at ease knowing that you have a classmate here? You should relax."

"Hya, Hyaiiiiiiii?!"

The girl jumped up with a scream.

"Hey, what's the matter?!"

All of the members were shocked at that outburst.

"Haah....., sorry, so sorry."

The girl bowed repeatedly.

"First, sit down."

Inaba ordered forcefully.

"Ah..... Ye, Ye, yes, ma'am."

For some reason, Inaba seemed to be..... in a terrible mood.

After all the CRC members had introduced themselves, they asked the girl to do the same.

"I am Enjouji Shino, from class 1B. You spell it like....."

"You're called Shino?! Isn't that really cute?! Let's call her Shino-chan, Iori!"

"That's it, Yui! You're usually told that your name is so good it doesn't need a nickname, right Shino-chan?"

Kiriyama and Yui cut in before she could finish introducing herself.

"You write my name..... like this."

She fished around in her bag and showed the members a notebook with the name written on it.

"That's a pretty cool spelling!"

"Th-Thank you, Aoki-senpai."

Enjouji's expression loosened. She was still pretty stiff, but some of the anxiety seemed to have passed.

Taichi also spoke up.

"By the way, it's rare for a high school student to have their names written on things. It's not a bad thing, I suppose."

"I, I, I, I often lose my things!"

Enjouji's looked down as her face reddened. She didn't look at Taichi. *Well, it's our first meeting, I don't think she hates me.*



"Umm, Nagase-senpai and Kiriyaama-senpai. I would be happy if you could call me 'Shino'."

"You're slow by three beats, Shino-chan! And here we were thinking that you were ignoring us!"

Nagase said, and Kiriyaama continued.

"But it's cute that you do things at your own pace, Shino-chan!"

"So, sorry....."

"You don't have to apologize! And you can call me Iori-senpai!"

"As for me, it'll be Yui-senpai, kay?"

"Understood, Iori-senpai, Yui-senpai."

"She's simply so cuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuute!"

It seems that Nagase and Kiriyaama have taken a liking to Enjouji.

The girl's shoulders stiffened as she peeked at Inaba.

"Ummmmmmmm..... then should I also call Inaba-senpai Himeko-senpai....."

"Don't call me that!"

"Hieh?! So, so, sorryyyy!"

Seeing Inaba being so ruthless, Taichi chided her.

"Oi, Inaba. You may not like being called by your given name, but to take it out on Enjouji who doesn't know....."

"The only one who can call me Himeko is Taichi! Got it?!"

"Oh? That's the reason?"

As her boyfriend, Taichi was elated and embarrassed at the same time. *Can I finally call Inaba "Himeko" now?*, he thought.

"Un, understood, Hime..... I mean, Inaba-senpai. Just, just, just checking, but what do I call Taichi-senpai....."

Enjouji directed the question at Inaba instead of Taichi. *Something's totally screwed up here*, Taichi thought.

"..... I'll allow you to just call him that."

"That sure took a lot of consideration."

*Not to mention that you had a really dangerous look there.*

"And I'll assume that Aoki-senpai is fine with that name....."

"Wait a minute, Shino-chan? How are you familiar with the name everyone calls me by even when you just came? Is it because I'm releasing an aura that makes everyone want to treat me like this? If so, I want to change it, but can you tell me what's wrong?"

Ignoring Aoki, who was actually being serious, Enjouji turned to look in Chihiro's direction.

She swallowed her saliva and opened her mouth.

"Could I also call Uwa-kun..... Chihiro-kun? Ah, er, you may not like being called by your given name by someone of the same age, but I thought it would be good to synchronize with everyone else."

"Do as you like."

"Alright, I'll do that. You know, when you hear your first name being said by people in your class, you would worry that you're the subject of some weird rumors, but in this case I felt that it would be important for us to be all together in this, so of course I would still call you by your surname in class, but..... so can I really call you 'Chihiro-kun'?!"

"Shino-chan's so amusing!" Kiriama and Nagase cried out in unison.

"As I said, do as you like. In any case, I haven't officially joined the club yet."

And then Chihiro continued coolly.

"So you've decided to join already? Weren't you just here to observe?"

Being asked a question by Uwa, Enjouji stiffened.

".....Oh right! Come to think of it, I hadn't decided whether or not to become a member!"

*Looks like we have an air-headed kid on our hands.*

"But then I acted as if I had joined the club already..... I apologize for that."

Nagase approached the despondent Enjouji.

"You don't have to be sorry at all! If you join the CRC, won't we be all together? How about it, since you're so friendly with Chihhi?"

"Chihhi?"

"That would refer to Uwa Chihiro-kun."

"That name somehow gives off a feeble feeling, doesn't it?"

"You picking a fight, Enjouji?"

"N-No, not at all!"

"Ahhahhah, you're good, Shino-chan."

Nagase applauded and laughed.

"You seem to be having fun."

Inaba grumbled to herself. As expected, she was in a bad mood.

"Is that a problem?"

Taichi asked.

"..... No, not as such."

That was what Inaba said, but there was no doubt that she was unsatisfied about something.

Taichi was being a good boyfriend and wasn't just about looks.

*So, what exactly is she worrying about..... seriously.*

"Inaba, you..... think that Enjouji's like a cute loli, so....."

"..... N-Nope. Totally wrong."

Bulls-eye.

*For someone so foolishly open, she does have moments when she's embarrassed and shy.*

*Brave, and at the same time, cowardly. The cutest girl who's the most troublesome to be with is definitely Inaba Himeko.*

*Well, Enjouji's certainly a cute girl who tickles the desire to protect, but....."*

"Owwwww?!"

Taichi was pinched by Inaba with all her might.

"What's up with that?"

"Listen to your own heart."

With sharp intuition and the ability to read thoughts, she's a scary girlfriend.

*I definitely won't be able to cheat on her. Well, not that I want to.*

"What are Taichi-senpai and Inaba-senpai doing?"

Kiriyama and Nagase answered Enjouji's query.

"Ah-don't worry, this is a customary event."

"Yup, they're just lovebirds."

"Wow, this is the first time I'm seeing lovebirds."

"So you can be so fluently toxic too, Enjouji."

Even though she probably didn't have any bad intentions when she said it.

"Fuh, heh, ha, heh?" Enjouji was somehow confused at Taichi's words.

Enjouji shook her head wildly.

".....Huh? About the lovebirds..... Are Taichi-senpai and Inaba-senpai dating?"

"If not, what do you think I was talking about, Shino-chan!"

"It's cute how you're like so late to realize everything, Shino-chan!"

Nagase and Kiriyama shouted out again.

Taichi muttered without thinking.

"The two of you would say that Enjouji-san is cute no matter what she does, right?"

Seems like "cute" is the strongest multi-purpose phrase for a girl.

"Heh-, hah-, wow," some sounds of admiration gushed out of Enjouji as she

studied Taichi and Inaba.

"What is it?"

Inaba asked somewhat oppressively.

"Um, I mean, you two suit each other so well. I want to be like that too-. Eh, ah, I think it would be impossible for me, so should I just give up?"

Enjouji said and laughed weakly.

"..... Suit each other..... Want to be like that. In other words..... we look like your ideal couple and you want to be like us, right?"

"Ah, I don't think I'll ever be able to reach your standard..... so I admire you two a lot!"

At Enjouji's words, Inaba's jaw interestingly loosened.

"Hm, admire, huh..... in that case, you can be my disciple, Shino. In any case, you're cute. If you have anything you don't understand about school or anything, just come and ask."

"Isn't that a complete change in attitude!"

It's quite rare to see someone change tact so cleanly.

"Thank you, Inaba-senpai!"

"You can call me the master of love too, you know?"

She was totally getting carried away.

"H-Hold it, Inaba! That title's too heavy for you to bear! That's a name that only Fujishima can take!"

"So you're randomly standing up for Fujishima?"

Inaba glared intently at Taichi.

"No, I just thought that it would be so sad to steal Fujishima's role when she's down in the dumps....."

*Shit, what's up with this feeling? While I only had negative one-liners for her character in the past, when she's gone there's this sense of loss.....*

*I'd wished for change, but when that did happen, I started longing for the*

*original state. It's a strange thing.*

"By the way, Shino-chan."

Aoki opened his mouth.

"Yui and I also plan to be that ideal couple, so you could also call us your masters..... ow!"

Slam! Kiriya hit his head with a notebook.

"We don't need you planting any false information."

"..... Anyway, what time is it? Can we go home?"

Chihiro grumbled exasperatedly.

"I think we've forgotten our original motive. We were trying to get Shino-chan to join our club, weren't we?"

Nagase asked.

"I, I haven't decided if I want to join yet."

"Ahh, I see..... I don't think we've asked this yet, but why did you decide to come here to observe?"

"T-That's....."

Enjouji twitched nervously.

Like a stone sculpture, she stopped moving, and only her eyes darted around disconcertedly.

Naturally, everyone focused on Enjouji.

"So, the reason for observing?"

Judging that Enjouji had misheard, Kiriya repeated the question.

".....It, it's a secret."

"Secret?"

Aoki asked.

"..... It's confidential."

"It's the same even if you use another word!" Taichi wanted to comment, but

hesitated.

That was because Enjouji was looking down and seemed to be shrinking away.

"Well, it's fine if you don't want to say it. Okay, alright?"

Nagase smoothed over the awkward atmosphere.

"Ah..... I also..... So, sorry....."

"It's fine, it's fine, don't worry about it! Now, to pull yourself together and get back to our usual....."

Now it was Nagase's turn to become like a sculpture.

She wore an expression that showed that she had just realized something really important.

"Usual? What do you mean by that? I don't really know that much about this club."

Chihiro said, and Enjouji followed up.

"On the flier, I read that you make a newspaper that includes various articles, and you also do various things..... What do you mean by various?"

All five second-year members of the CRC stiffened.

They had made announcements that they were recruiting new members.

They had also hoped to attract new students.

However.

.....They hadn't considered what to do with the new members!

"W-Well, today's just our first meeting," Nagase said as she tried to play it down. After some light conversation, they ended club activities for the day.

Three days until the deadline for club registration.



During lunch break of the next day, five members of the CRC, including Taichi, gathered at the courtyard.

"It must be fate that Chihhi and Shino-chan came to us right before the deadline. We just have to get them in! They're interesting kids, after all."

Nagase exclaimed as she held her fist.

"They do have interesting habits," Inaba added.

The three others nodded in agreement.

"Mm-, but don't you think that 'have to get them in' isn't a really good expression? I think it should be more along the lines of 'we'll let them join if they really want to'."

Kiriyama seemed like she was about to give a spirited assertion like Nagase, but she was unexpectedly calm.

"Oh? Yui, weren't you the one who brought Chihhi along and was so excited about Shino-chan?"

"But that's..... we'll still have to leave it up to their independent decisions."

"Hmmmm, ..... I suppose."

Nagase muttered.

After hearing that exchange, Aoki spoke.

"Don't either of you want new members?"

"Of course we do!" They shouted in unison.

"And yet we can all confirm that the atmosphere here seems a little uneager-"

In response to Aoki's jest, Taichi mumbled.

"It's not so simple, since we have to consider 'that guy'."

"Right, stop! We can only come up with a provisional conclusion for that line of argument, so that's enough! We all came here to brainstorm about today's club activities, after all."

Nagase brought the derailing discussion back to its original track.

*Oh yeah, that's true,* Taichi thought as he recalled their original motive.



"Yep. We have to make them think, 'This club is amazing!' We don't have much time, either."

Aoki replied to Kiriyama's assertion.

"In Chihiro's case, he's probably never going to say that, though."

"Cut!"

Once again, Nagase stopped the discussion, then continued it.

"In any case, it's just weird for everyone to be doing whatever they like, so, we need something really fun and interactive!"

"So the problem is making it simple, yet big, right? I was thinking that doing whatever we did last year would be fine....."

As Inaba started talking,

"G-Good afternoon, senpai."

A loud voice could be heard from the side.

"Shino-chan, isn't it~? What are you doing?"

Even though Nagase spoke in a cheerful tone and everyone else also greeted her, Enjouji sighed as she approached them.

"I was heading back to my classroom when I saw all of you..... What about you, senpai?"

"We were talking about what we should do today..... ah."

"What we should do today.....?"

Enjouji tilted her head in puzzlement in response to Nagase's words.

*This is bad!* Nagase's face said it all.

It was probably an awkward situation indeed.

"Really..... Or rather, as I thought..... so the club activities haven't been decided yet, and the CRC's just a place for normies....."

"No, no, you're totally mistaken! And really? Normies?!"

"I, I'm in the wrong place, aren't I..... I guess I'll just join another club....."

"Hold it! We really do serious journalistic work, right, Yui?"

Having the conversation thrust at her, Kiriya panicked.

"Eh?!..... Yeah, that's right! Even now, we're having a meeting to decide on where to collect data."

"Can someone like me handle real data collection....."

"It'll be fine! You're just starting out, so we'll have something suited for beginners..... right, Aoki?"

Kiriya sent the conversation to Aoki with a killer pass.

"Suited for beginners?! Oh..... Ehh..... Right! So we decided to just do it all in school, right, Taichi?"

The ball had spun around to Taichi before he even knew it.

"R-Right. It'll be in school, so....."

Taichi glanced at Inaba at the side.

Her expression showed that she was out of ideas.

He certainly couldn't throw the ball at his own girlfriend. As a man..... he could only decide by himself!

".....R-Right. So, today..... we'll be gathering information on the other clubs!"



And with that, it was decided that the CRC would go around collecting data of other clubs.

*For something thought of on the spot, wasn't it quite the brilliant idea?* Taichi sang his own praises.

They would be a bother if so many of them went at once, so they played rock-paper-scissors to split themselves into two groups. This would go on for three sets. With this, they would be able to show off their serious attitude towards research, and could aim to break the ice between the new members. (The one

who thought that up was Inaba. She sure is reliable.)

After school, they waited in the club room. Enjouji arrived, and while they had been worried that Chihiro would not show up, he came too. They then quickly split up and began their activities.

The first set comprised of Taichi, Kiriya, Aoki and Chihiro. The four-man group went to visit the Calligraphy Club in the Home Economics Room 2.

"By the way, why the Calligraphy Club?"

Taichi answered Aoki's question.

"I was talking about today's activity in class, and there was someone who said it was fine for us to visit."

"Welcome-! Yaegashi-kun, Yui-chan and their fellow travelers."

The person who greeted them with such high tension was Nakayama Mariko, who belonged to the same class as Taichi and Kiriya, and was still sporting twintails.

"Is it really alright, Nakayama-chan?"

Kiriya asked slightly apologetically.

"It's a-okay-! We look for new stimuli to spice up our everyday life. Right, guys?"

Nakayama directed the question at her fellow club members, and one person laughed and replied, "Isn't it just you?"

There were eight girls and two boys in the room.

There was a heterogeneous mixture of upper and lower classmen, resulting in a harmonious atmosphere.

"I've been thinking this for a long time, but you don't really fit the Calligraphy Club, Nakayama."

"What?! You trying to diss me or the Calligraphy Club, Yaegashi-kun?!"

"N-No, just saying that it doesn't really fit your image."

"Image, huh? Hey, freshie, what image do you have of the Calligraphy Club?"

You are a first-year student, right?"

Nakayama approached Chihiro.

"Plain and insignificant."

"Oh?! This one's tongue is sharper than I thought!"

"Hey, Chihiro-kun! Even if it's true, you have to say it the right way!"

"Yui-san, you fail at backing others up."

Chihiro made an exasperated face at Kiriya's advice.

"Oi! If the two of you continue saying that the Calligraphy Club is plain, you'll have to answer to my flaming twintails!"

"What, are your twintails deadly weapons? And you're fine with 'insignificant'?"

Taichi quipped.

"What are all of you saying? Calligraphy is extremely popular in a five-kilometer radius around me!"

"That was such a self-centered comment, but it was pretty cool."

Nakayama is a refreshing, lively person.

At the Calligraphy Club, the CRC members learnt a few simple tricks to write words beautifully, and then they got to experience the club activities. That was going into a report in their newspaper.

"Alright, lesson's over! That initiation into calligraphy was free of charge! Now we'll lend you a set of materials, so write whatever you like! I'll correct it afterwards!"

While Nakayama was fine since she seemed to be having fun, Taichi felt bad for the other members, so he went to apologize to them. However, they smiled and said, "We always do the same things, so a change like this is good too."

Like this, Taichi and the rest gripped a brush, probably for the first time since elementary school.

Chihiro was at the same table as Taichi.

The table to the side was occupied by Kiriya and Aoki.

"Now, what word should I write~..... I got it, Yui! Let's write each other's names and give it as a present....."

"I'll just write a word I like and hang it up at home-"

"By the way, my favourite word is....."

"You really don't get discouraged, huh? That's enough, so just shut up and write!"

"I've gotten used to not being in the same class with you, but now..... I'm happy to be scolded like that!"

"G-Gross! Absolutely gross! Someone help~! Chihiro-kun~!"

Aoki and Kiriya haven't changed at all.

"You're being called for."

Taichi said just in case, but Chihiro curtly replied, "Not my problem."

"It seems like I'm being taken for a fool, and I don't want to get into that loop."

".....Can't really deny that."

Pulling himself together, Taichi considered what word he should write.

Should he go with a slogan, or should he write some pro-wrestling-related terminology....., or perhaps something that he can give to his sister....., since it would be simply embarrassing to give it to Inaba.

"I should be in the dojo at this time....."

Taichi could hear Chihiro muttering under his breath.

Taichi talked to Chihiro, who was looking down at his feet.

"Chihiro, you seem like you work really hard for karate."

"Well, quite, I suppose."

"Are you aiming for the national competitions? I don't know how difficult they are, though."

"I'm not an idiot, so I won't say something so fantastical."

"What's wrong with being an idiot?"

"You've seen Yui-san. People like her are called 'geniuses'."

"Kiryama, huh..... you have a point."

It was getting a little awkward, so Taichi returned his eyes to the table and dipped his brush in ink.

But he still hadn't decided what to write. He continued thinking while holding his brush.

"Taichi-san."

He raised his head in response to the voice, and noticed Chihiro looking at him with quite a serious expression. He usually looked languid, but now he was completely different.

"Why am I doing something like this here?"

"You're only asking now?"

He'd thought that Chihiro was going to talk about a solemn topic, but was he just fooling around?

"No, that's not it. I'm referring to something more fundamental here."

"Fundamental?"

"What exactly is this?"

Chihiro said, as he spun his still clean brush around his finger.

*Sure enough, the idea was only thought of a few hours ago, and I'm somehow facing a piece of calligraphy paper now.*

"This is..... the Cultural Research Club."

That was all he could say.

"Can't see a clear purpose."

"And is that bad?"

Chihiro turned to look out of the window.

".....Since I go to a dojo, I don't want to join a club or anything, but since our school forces us to join one, I'm really reluctant to do anything. That's what I'm thinking."

The conversation had gone onto a slightly different topic. Taichi kept quiet and listened.

"Since I didn't want to be an official member of the Karate Club, it became really troublesome. I was actually fine with anything, so I deferred the decision making, but Yui-san dragged me here. To this burdensome place where I don't even know what I'm doing."

Chihiro sighed. This time, he shifted his gaze to the end of the table.

"But I'm somehow 'here' again today."

By 'here', he probably meant the CRC.

"Whether or not there's a goal..... What I'm trying to say is..... In any case."

Taichi couldn't quite catch Chihiro's murmuring monologue.

"Is it alright for me to be 'here'?"

Chihiro finally looked Taichi in the eye. It was a look that seemed to be discerning his thoughts, and he didn't want to be exposed to it for a long period of time.

Neither of them spoke, and time simply flowed for a while.

While there was supposed to be the sounds of Aoki and Kiriya bickering, the bright voice of Nakayama, and the clamor of others, Taichi somehow felt that it was quiet.

".....Whether it's 'alright' or 'not', that's not the problem, is it? It all depends on your will, doesn't it?"

A disappointed look appeared in Chihiro's eyes for a fleeting moment.

*I don't think I said anything wrong, did I?*

"Well, I suppose that's true."

Receiving Chihiro's affirmation, Taichi took a breath.

Why was he being so nervous in front of a junior, he thought.

But he at least knew that he wasn't mistaken. With that sense of security, he spoke lightly.

"Right?"

Taichi relaxed, and as if he was waiting for that opening, Chihiro let his words loose.

"Taichi-san, do you want us to join the club?"

*Of course*, Taichi wanted to say, but he couldn't.

He was absolutely shocked by this fact.

After missing the timing once, he was bewildered about why he couldn't speak up, and in that moment, he missed the chance to talk again.

"Now, now, Yaegashi-kun, and..... Chihiro-kun, was it? You two haven't been moving your hands this whole time-."

Nakayama cut in, destroying Taichi and Chihiro's space.

In the end, Taichi never got around to answering Chihiro's question.

"Well, for our school, you can join a club just by submitting the application form, so you could even barge into the Karate Club, if you like."

With that, Taichi discontinued his conversation with Chihiro.

With only a few drops of eagerness, he dipped his brush in ink.

He wanted new club members.

He would definitely welcome Chihiro and Enjouji.

But Taichi noticed something pulling on his heart.

He couldn't quite grasp what exactly it was.

Was the «Heartseed» issue lurking in the background?

Or was it something else?





With the first set finished, the CRC (with two additional members) gathered. The other team comprising Inaba, Nagase and Enjouji had also achieved some results.

They split up into teams by playing rock-paper-scissors again, and then the second set of the club patrolling started.

Taichi's team went to the second floor of the North Building.

"Welcome to the Student Council Service Club!"

The person who guided them was the former president of class 1C, Fujishima Maiko.

Taichi, Nagase and Enjouji were tasked with gathering information about the Student Council Service Club.

"Sorry for troubling you, Fujishima, even when you seem so busy."

"It's fine, Yaegashi-kun..... Ufufu, I'm being needed by everyone..... Fufufu."

Fujishima grinned ecstatically.

"As I thought, we can always rely on Fujishima-san."

"Always rely on me, you said! No..... I mean, of course! And since Nagase said it, it's power is hundredfold! Hustle, hustle!"

*She sure is energetic. It's great that Fujishima seems to have recovered from her depression earlier.*

"And from me..... T-Thank you very much!"

Probably thinking that she had to continue, Enjouji quickly lowered her head.

"Don't worry at all, Enjouji-san! By the way, you're cute. So cute I want to eat you up!"

"Way too energetic, I see."

Taichi moved slightly so that Enjouji was behind him.

"Hm, I wasn't expecting you to guard against me when I was just joking."

"No, I just unconsciously....."

Glancing behind, Taichi noticed Enjouji shrinking away and trying to hide behind his back.

Enjouji's cuteness was like his sister's, arousing his desire to protect.

Well, of course..... But no one could reach his sister's level of cuteness!

.....

"Taichi, you're thinking of something disgusting, aren't you? Yup, I thought I would check just in case."

Nagase sure is a person with good perception.

"Just enter already."

"Excuse me for disturbing."

The Service Club's room was clean and well-ordered and was approximately 1.5 times the size of the CRC's club room. There was a huge table in the middle of the room, a middle-sized table, as well as small desks at the side. On two ends of the room were lockers packed with documents.

There were four club members in the room.

A girl offered them a seat, and prepared tea.

"We have a lot more council members, but today more than half of them are out."

The CRC members sat in a line and faced Fujishima.

"Right, shall we begin? .....Hm? What were we starting in the first place?"

That foolish question was fitting of Fujishima, who often acts arbitrarily based on her own judgment.

Nagase asked a question.

"Ummm, when we were planning for the next CR News, we thought 'Why don't we make a report on the club activities here?', so we want to gather information of different clubs. I mean, there's so many clubs in our school, and there has to be some clubs that no one knows about, right?"

"Ah, a serious article, I see. Although CR News is always made up of random

articles that expose your personal interests....."

"Lalala! Can't hear a thing!"

Nagase hurriedly drowned out Fujishima's words.

Thanks to them unconsciously showing off, the fact that this was the Cultural Research Club's first publication of a serious newsletter had been hidden from Enjouji.

"Random..... expose your interests.....?"

"Shino-chan! As a result of us dauntlessly displaying each of our areas of expertise, we are able to provide content that goes beyond the forefront of this epoch, so that was a natural response!"

"I don't really understand..... but Iori-senpai was really cool when using all those difficult words. I wish I can become like you!"

"Shino-chan, I'm telling you just in case, but if someone you don't recognize uses obscure vocabulary like this, it's some sort of scam. Don't believe it, okay?"

Enjouji Shino sure is a girl whose future one would be worried for.

"Anyway, I just need to introduce you to our club, right?" Fujishima said.

"The Student Council Service Club, as its name suggests, provides assistance to the running of the Student Council. As you know, the Student Council is decided by elections, but here, anyone can join, so this is ultimately a club, and it's not the same as the Student Council."

"Yeah, I know that much."

Nagase nodded.

"Since we have 'Student Council' in our name, lots of people interested in the actual thing join us, too, but....."

"But?"

This time, Taichi interjected.

"In reality..... we're just the subcontractors and errand boys for the Student Council!"

Fujishima burst out, and the other club members at neighbouring tables stopped whatever they were doing and turned their heads horizontally with amazing vigor.

"We implement whatever the people at the Student Council decide on..... Using that framework, they totally push us around!"

Fujishima's speech was really heated.

"Those guys don't know anything of the hardships on the ground! They only keep to themselves in their meeting room, after all!"

It seems that the problems of modern society can even be seen here.

It was a severe topic for a high school club.

"Like this, the Service Club had continued doing impossible errands."

Another club member next to them nodded fervently.

"Um, did you mean to use the past tense in that sentence?"

Nagase asked Fujishima a question.

Although we're of the same age, she unconsciously uses polite speech<sup>[31]</sup>..... That's Fujishima Maiko!

"Good question, Nagase-san! Yes, we realized the futility of our actions along the way. We stopped being used, and instead, we influenced the Student Council!"

The other club members on neighbouring tables starting applauding.

As expected of Fujishima Maiko!

She flaunts her charisma not only in class, but also in her club!

"But then again..... was the word 'influenced' in past tense?"

Enjouji asked timidly, and Fujishima, who had been in perfect form, hung her head.

The other Service Club members also dropped their shoulders in a crestfallen fashion.

The room turned gloomy in an instance.

"Eh.....? Ah, um, did I do something rude..... I'm really sorr-ouch?!"

Having lowered her head too much, Enjouji's forehead bumped on the table.

".....It hurts....."

"Past tense..... That's right..... We've gone back to what we were in the past..... They..... said some humiliating words like 'Someone who can't even win a vote for class president shouldn't be entrusted with the entire student population'....."

Fujishima removed her glasses and rubbed her eyes.

"All the senpais and everyone has been fighting so hard, but....., just when the structure change between school years was unstable, it's because of people like me who break the peace that everything has been thrown into chaos....."

*What, are we in a state of civil war now? Is there a power struggle going on?*

"I deeply apologize....."

"It's fine, Fujishima-san! You just have to take your revenge!"

A club member encouraged, and the others voiced their agreement.

"Fujishima, you should just slowly regain your energy. Until then, we'll work hard."

"E-Everyone....."

A touching scene unfolded.

"What a good story....."

Nagase said emotionally.

"That's right..... If I stumble, I just have to get up again!"

Strength returned to Fujishima's eyes.

"Do your best, Fujishima!" Everyone cheered.

"Thank you, everyone..... I, I'll try as hard as I can!"

"That's the spirit! Ah, Fujishima-san, isn't it the time?"

A girl from the Student Council Service Club said.

"Ah, that's true. Then, let us return to our daily routine!"

"What's your daily routine, Fujishima-san? Since we're doing our report, could we tag along?"

Taichi continued.

"Good idea. I'm also a little curious as to what the Service Club does everyday."

"Alright. Then, let us all go to the changing room. Do you have your track suits?"

".....Why?"

"Why..... we'll be doing strength training, of course."

"What?!"

"Fuoooh~ ..... Ugh."

Enjouji lay limp on the floor.

"Is that all the stamina you have, Enjouji-san! I never imagined that you couldn't even do ten push-ups!"

"So, sorry~ But, ..... I'm bad at exercises....."

"Then you won't be able to survive in this dog-eat-dog world!"

"Hi, Hiiii~"

In a corner of the sports grounds, Fujishima in her gym clothes had turned into a demonic instructor.

"No slacking, Yaegashi-kun! Boys have to do twice as much as girls!"

"Y-Yes..... Fifteen, sixteen..... What is this, anyway?! It's got nothing to do with the service club, right?!"

"What are you talking about? Those in the Service Club require strength and stamina!"

"Then, do the other members besides you do this?!"

"Nope, they don't."

"Then it's just YOUR daily routine, isn't it!"

What is she making us do? Or rather, what is Fujishima Maiko doing?!

"Haaah..... What a deplorable man full of complaints. You should learn from Nagase-san."

Looking to the side, Taichi noticed that Nagase had moved on from push-ups to sit-ups.

"Great! Strength training is fun! Feels like I'm honing my muscles!"

"Good for you, since you apparently find fun in everything!"

".....Shino is..... done....."

"Don't push yourself too hard, Enjouji!"

"Yaegashi-kun, less talk, more push-ups!"



When the time came, Taichi's team was released by Fujishima, and met again with the rest of the CRC.

"My arms and stomach....."

Enjouji moaned, exhausted.

".....Sorry. I was caught up with the flow and was late to raise an objection....."

"It, it, it's fine! Do, do, don't worry about me, Taichi-senpai!"

Enjouji bent her slumped body upward with a crunch.

Taichi noticed that Enjouji always talked to him with unnecessary anxiety.

Heading towards the third set, they formed groups by playing rock-paper-scissors again.

"So I'm with Chihiro again in the third set, huh. If only I could be with Shino-chan once."

Taichi replied with a question.

"Want to swap?"

"Ahh, it's alright. Following the rules fairly..... that's called being a man!"

"I always feel so stuffy every time I'm with Aoki-san, though-"

"Oiiii?! Even Chihiro has acquired that skill?!"

"Well, there's Nagase-san, so I guess it'll be perfectly refreshing."

"What's with that measurement?!"

"Hey, hey, Chihhi, aren't you considerably overstating my value?<sup>[32]</sup> And you can call me Iori-san, kay?"

"Nah, I'm good."

"This guy's such a tsundere!"

"How friendly they are."

Taichi muttered, and Inaba responded.

"That's true, on the surface."

"On the surface?"

".....Hm? Ahh, just saying. No need to think too deeply about it."

"On the surface.....?" Inaba said while tilting her head. She seemed to be pondering hard about the phrase she said.

"Taichi, come here."

Nagase called softly and pulled on his uniform.

"It's hard to change now that we've decided already, so..... Take care of Kaoru-chan and Inaba-chan, okay?"

"Kaoru..... Ah, Setouchi, right?"

Taichi's team was heading to the Volunteer Club as their next port-of-call. That was the club of Setouchi Kaoru, who was involved in the kerfuffle during their first-year club presentation, and was now the representative of class 2B.



"---Anyway, at the Volunteer Club, we work together with external organizations and do volunteer work..... Although since I hardly participated in my first year, I shouldn't be saying it so proudly."

Setouchi explained the outline of the Volunteer Club to Taichi, Inaba, Kiriyaama and Enjouji.

"Thanks, that will be useful for our reference. By the way, so you were in the Volunteer Club from the first year, huh. That's a surprise."

While she had short black hair now, Setouchi used to have dyed hair and acted like a delinquent back in her first year.

".....Yeah, well, that's, I suppose."

Setouchi flushed and turned in another direction.

It seems that Setouchi is the type to be embarrassed at learning about her good points. In that sense, she has a common point with Inaba.

"In any case, the horrible things you did to people cannot be redeemed. No matter how many charitable acts you do, that won't change."

Inaba proclaimed strictly.

".....Yes."

While hanging her head, Setouchi replied with a grave countenance.

"Also, don't feel too good about yourself. Rehabilitated ex-delinquents are usually extolled, but it's obvious that someone who has always been normal is more remarkable."

".....It is as you say."

"W-Why don't you stop now, Inaba? Let's do this with smiles on our faces, yeah?"

Kiriyaama cut in.

"As always, you're too naive. But I understand, I just wanted to say that."

"Sorry," Setouchi said as she lowered her head.

"Ummm..... What's going on..... Ne, nevermind. I don't need to know."

Enjouji starting speaking but cancelled her question.

An awkward silence descended.

"Don't misunderstand."

Inaba opened her mouth again.

"I hate what you did in the past. Also, I hate how you're being flattered for reforming. But I don't hate you as a person."

She said with a really kind tone.

Displaying a perplexed expression, Setouchi spoke slowly with an amiable tone.

".....Thank, you."

"Yui-senpai, Yui-senpai. I've been estranged from all this, so I don't really know, but could this be what is called tsundere?"

"That's right, Shino-chan. That's what you call a typical tsundere. If Iori were here, she would name this symptom 'Tsundereban'."

"Shut up! It we're talking about tsundere, it would be you, no matter how you think about it!"

"Not really-. Right, Shino-chan?"

"Eh, ehhhh, then, then how about we say that both of you are tsundere....."

"No!"

"So, next Saturday, there's an external event 'Simulation Experience of the Sight-impaired'. We'll be managing its operations, so today we'll be preparing for that."

"Ah, I think I've done something like this in middle school. It's the one where you wear an eyemask and experience the typical of a blind person, right?"

Kiriyama asked, and Setouchi nodded.

"So, what we have to do now is a dry run. I was thinking that we would get all of you to have that simulation experience. What do you think?"

"Of course! You're cooperating with us and letting us gather data, anyway."

"I, I haven't done it before, so..... I'll do it."

"Please."

"When Taichi's blindfolded, I can assist him..... I'm the only one Taichi can rely on when he has lost his sight.....huh. Fufufu..... That's a good play, let's do it."

"Inaba, what are you talking about?"

There was one person having a huge misunderstanding. Play? What does she mean by play?

"Then we'll have Inaba-san and Yaegashi-kun form a couple, and Yui-chan and..... Enjouji-chan form a combination, alright?"

Setouchi handed them eyemasks and bibs that had "Currently experiencing the simulation of an eyesight-impaired person" written on them.

"What's with these bibs..... Not cute at all~"

"If we conduct this simulation outside, it might cause trouble to others, so we have to use these."

Setouchi replied. Kiriama said "Fine-" and reluctantly put on the bib.

"Paying attention to the points I explained earlier, try walking to the flower bed. There aren't much people around, so just take care of the uneven ground. The play using walking sticks will be done later..... Ah, I messed up."

"So even Setouchi says things wrongly."

Taichi vacantly mumbled. He wouldn't be able to take it if even Setouchi became a weird character.

For the Taichi-Inaba group, Taichi would be the first to experience the lack of eyesight, and Inaba the first to take the guidance role.

"Now, have your field of vision dispossessed."

".....Just say 'Put on your eyemask' or something."

Taichi fitted himself with the eyemask.

"Uoh, it's pitch-dark."

Taichi realized that he would be afraid of losing his vision the most, as compared to the other five senses.

He felt really insecure.

He couldn't grasp what was happening in his surroundings.

He felt that his sense of hearing, smell and touch had been sharpened, as he experienced a strange, unusual sensation.

"Taichi."

He could hear Inaba's voice.

Trying to cling on, he reached out towards the direction of the voice.

Their hands gripped each other, and Inaba's warmth spread to him.

He was able to do this without any hesitation because of his trust in Inaba. At the same time, Inaba reached out to him because she thought that he would trust her. That was what Taichi felt.

It was such a trivial thing, but from this he could see the size of their bond.

They had trust in each other, so they knew that they were trusted.

And because of that, they could rely on each other.

The two of them had a powerful, two-sided bond.

That was probably true for everyone in the CRC.

"Let's go."

Inaba progressed forward. Guided by her, Taichi moved one step ahead.

One step, and another step.

Since it was the only thing he could rely on, Taichi focused all his attention on his left hand. He fell into a delusion where he could feel the breathing of her skin.

".....How about trying to hold somewhere other than the hand?"

Inaba suddenly suggested.

Naturally, Taichi couldn't see what expression Inaba was having right now.

"Here."

"Hey, wait, don't suddenly let go."

Confused, Taichi panicked and reached out.

"Hyaun?!"

Inaba squealed adorably.

"Where are you touching..... idiot."

"Hey, what exactly am I touching?! Based on touch, I think it might be your stomach or somewhere at your waist, but is that area with hard bone following a part with little roughness your chest..... Fubh?!"

He was hit on the head.

"As if! That was the waist! And when I was planning to follow up from 'where are you touching..... idiot' with 'just kidding you're just touching my waist!'"

"So that's it. By the way, that was really..... cute."

"C-Cute..... idiot."

".....Would the two of you over there stop flirting?"

Setouchi's cold voice could be heard.

"Sorry." The two of them earnestly apologized.

Wanting to check the current situation, Taichi removed his eyemask.

At that exact moment, he noticed the Kiriyaama-Enjouji group starting.

"Let, let's go, Kiriyaama-senpai! I'll be giving my full support, so don't worry!"

Enjouji, who was the first to lead, stuck out her hand with a nervous expression.

"Okay. Tell me if there are any dangers."

But Kiriyaama, with her eyemask on, briskly walked forward. Did she not notice the hand?

"Ah? What? Y-Yui-senpai, my hand..... or more importantly, you can walk normally?!"

"Eh? If you make a serious effort, even when your field of vision disappears, you can still sort of tell by the 'Qi'<sup>[33]</sup>, right?"

"What's 'Qi'? What are you?"

Taichi quipped.

She was a karate girl so amazing that she could probably go beyond the limits of a normal person.

"It's alright, Shino-chan? Here, take my hand."

"Ow..... I, I think I sprained my ankle....."

"Eh?! Are you sure you're fine?!"

"Ah, yes."

".....KiriYama is wearing an eyemask, right? There's nothing wrong with my eyes, right?"

Unable to believe it, Taichi asked.

"Don't worry, I can see it too..... I must remember to update Yui's combat value later."

*What are you trying to turn into data, Inaba? Or should I say that it was expected of someone who enjoys collecting and analysing data?*

"This totally doesn't seem like a dry run....."

Setouchi sighed.

Finally, Setouchi said, "Let's hope that you don't end up thinking that this experience was 'scary' or 'difficult'. Instead, let us learn from this troubling experience and consider what we can do, living in a society with sight-impaired people who experience this everyday."

Taking these words to heart, Taichi's team ended the data collection activity.



It was quite late when it all ended.

In the evening, the CRC and their new member candidates walked on the sports grounds towards the main gate, together with other students whose club activities had also just ended.

"So how did you find today's activity, everyone? Any feedback?"

Nagase directed the question at the four second-year students.

The two first-year students were walking slightly ahead of them.

"It was a fun idea, and the two of them did have fun, I think."

Kiriyama said and Aoki continued.

"The bond between me and Chihiro totally deepened..... he treats me so rudely although I'm his senpai."

"But it doesn't tell us whether they would want to join our club."

Inaba noted.

"As for whether they think that the CRC is great....."

Taichi could only speak without confidence.

"Wait, hold it, why are you being so negative? Let's be forward-looking about this."

Nagase clapped. In response, Inaba said,

"We'll just have to ask them, right?"

"That's kind of..... I was wondering if it would be too pushy."

It's rare to see Nagase hesitate like this.

"You were the one who said not to be negative, but what are you worrying about now?"

Inaba moved closer to Chihiro and Enjouji.

"Chihiro, Enjouji, how was today? Our main activity is to compile all the

articles and make an issue of 'CR News'..... if I'm not wrong. It's not settled yet, so if you want to do something, just say so. Well, with that..... er....."

For some reason. Inaba, who was supposed to have the most authority, lost her vigor at the end.

She regained her composure and cleared her throat.

"So? Have you decided to join us?"

Chihiro and Enjouji stopped.

Noticing that, Taichi and the other three members of the CRC also halted a few paces away from the two first-years and Inaba. They wanted to see it through.

"Well..... thinking about it." "Ummm..... ummmmmm."

Chihiro and Enjouji were being indecisive.

At the moment, the two of them saw the four-man group behind them.

Although they were seen, Taichi and the rest didn't move.

".....Still undecided." ".....I don't know."

Two days until the deadline for club registration.



"Today's the only day!! The deadline for club registration is very soon, after all!!"

Nagase shouted in the room of class 2B the next day.

"I suppose. But what should we do....."

They had an enjoyable interaction yesterday, he thought. But on top of that, he didn't think that they could offer much else.

Kiriyama mumbled.



"Shino-chan came because she was interested, so she goes without saying, but when I asked Chihiro-kun at the dojo, he seemed pretty interested too, I think."

"Is that so?"

"Yup, it's a first for Chihiro-kun..... But he didn't mention anything about wanting to join."

The two of them did say that they would come for club activities today, so there was no doubt that they had some feeling of wanting to join the club. If not, they wouldn't have stayed for so many days.

That being said, it wasn't enough for the decisive blow, or perhaps they still had some sort of concern, so they couldn't decide to join the CRC.

"Then all we can do is raise our ambitions and find some fulfilling activity like yesterday's!"

Nagase asserted.

They then started talking about visiting clubs, like they did the day before. But Kiriya raised an objection.

"I think it will be difficult with just that."

".....Yeah, I think so too."

Nagase's face became depressed.

"The CRC trio's looking so gloomy in the morning. Did you want to visit the track-and-field club?"

A tall girl appeared at the table which the three of them surrounded.

With wavy, brightly-dyed hair and a crisp personality trait, she was Kiriya's best friend, Kurihara Yukina.

"Morning, Yukina. That's right, we have a problem....."

Having heard the situation from Kiriya, Yukina nodded.

"Hm, I see, you're faced with the delicate question of whether the new students will join your club, and you're troubled about what to do."

"Yeah."

Kirihara nodded.

"At our school, it's difficult to quit or change your club, so you have to be prudent about this."

".....Yup."

".....Hmmmmmmmm."

Kurihara released a weird sound.

"What's the matter, Yukina?"

Questioned by Kiriyama, Kurihara sighed.

"I..... I'm weak to that 'dejected look' of yours. I really want to do something to help."

"Yukina-chan seems like she'll be a great mother-. Either that, or you'll be obsessed with some useless man."

Nagase said smoothly, and Kurihara retorted.

"The second part was totally unnecessary."

"Perhaps you can take this into consideration," she started with a preface.

"How to actually get hold of a student who expresses interest in joining? That's a problem for every club. So, the track-and-field club decided to arrange a marathon right before the deadline of club applications, which is today."

"Why?"

Nagase asked.

"An event like this would strengthen the camaraderie between active members and potential new members. When first-year students reach the goal after going through hardship..... with their senpais welcoming them with smiles..... hearing some encouraging words..... and after that diving right into a barbecue party..... don't you think that flow is great?"

"Amazing! What an intellectual strategem!"

Kiriyama applauded excitedly.

"Fufun," Kurihara laughed proudly.

"Well, you didn't think up that idea, right?"

"Nice of you to come up with an idea that reminds us of the athletic festival!"

"Yaehashi! Iori! Just praise me honestly!"

"It's just a joke, Yukina-chan. Anyway, it would be good for us to think strategically."

Nagase suggested.

"For example~?" Kiriya asked.

"Mm~, how about the two of you think of the CRC's charm and use it as an appeal?"

"I see," Taichi said and nodded.

The three members of the CRC wracked their brains.

".....So I was thinking."

Kurihara cut in, and Kiriya asked,

"What is it, Yukina?"

"Thinking normally, erm, these new students wouldn't be drawn to clubs they don't know about, right? Since they don't know what they'll be doing."

"Ah." The three of them agreed.

Now that she said it, it was quite an obvious observation. Students might be attracted to clubs based on the condition of fun, but then there would be lots of better clubs around.

Kurihara continued.

"So, what if they could be drawn to you as human beings?"

*Us, as human beings?*

*Does that refer to a certain person? Or all of us?*

"So what you're trying to say is....."

Nagase stood up.

"We just have to show off our awesomeness!"

*Would that really work?* Taichi thought, but since he didn't have any other suggestions, he couldn't object.

"That's great! Let's show off how cool-cute we are!"

It seemed that Kiriyaama also wanted to head in that direction, for she was beaming brightly.

"Alright, then we'll do an event or..... I got it! Yukina-chan!"

Nagase was deep in her role as the CRC chairman. It would be almost impossible to stop her in that state.

"Heh?"

"Since we're doing that Club Experience Report, we'll also be joining that marathon! It would be fine if we could just use the course. The athletic team of me and Kiriyaama can play an active role..... and that Chihhi and Shino-chan can get information..... it's perfect!"

"Hah? But..... You guys don't have experience of track-and-field activities, right?"

"It'll be fine, right, Yui?"

"Yeah, the Cultural Research Club is all-rounded!"

"That's a first," Taichi muttered.

"But even if you say you want to join....."

"Yukina..... couldn't you somehow do something?"

Being looked at by Yui from below, Kurihara made a bitter face.

".....Fine, I'll try something!"

Kurihara sure was thoroughly weak to Kiriyaama.



When Kurihara talked to her senpais, they responded with, "What?! The CRC known for gathering cute girls wants to join, you say?! Of course it's fine! We can get them to join the BBQ later on too! It's free for girls and 500 yen for guys!" Like this, the CRC got the green light to join the marathon.

"Well, we have lots of boys in our club, and a lot of them are hungry for cute girls, y'know? I wish they can just realize that they'll always be unpopular, although that would be totally impossible." Kurihara explained (in an inadvertantly cruel manner).

It was then decided that Nagase and Kiriya, who had confidence in their stamina, as well as Aoki, who had recklessly volunteered, would participate in the marathon, while the other members of the CRC would gather information about it.

But something unexpected happened.

"Could..... Could I participate too?!"

After school at the club room, Enjouji asked after hearing about the marathon.

"No, it's fine if you don't run, Shino-chan. You just have to observe us." Nagase said, but Enjouji did not yield.

"Please, please let me do it..... Properly experiencing what everyone normally does, and accompanying all of you..... that is what observing really is."

That day, Enjouji's small frame was tense, and she had a determined expression.

"If I can properly follow everyone from behind..... when that happens....."

Enjouji looked at the CRC members in turn..... and became fainthearted for some reason.

"..... Ah, of course..... I'll stop if I'm being a bother..... Or actually someone like me with no stamina shouldn't even participate in the first place..... haha."

"Shino-chan.....! I'm moved by your spirit! If you really want to join, then let's do it together!"

Nagase said, and Enjouji replied with a "Yes!"

With that, Enjouji's feelings formed a chain reaction.

"If that's the case, I'll run too."

Chihiro said.

"C-Chihiro too?!" Kiriama's surprised voice resounded.

"Ahh, it's not like Enjouji. But I think that if we're collecting data, moving around would make for better training."

Hearing that, Nagase exclaimed, "Uwoah~!" as her body trembled ecstatically.

"So all of you are in such high spirits! If that's so..... then all of us will run in the marathon!"

Since all seven of them were participating in the track-and-field club's marathon, they gathered at the nature park, which was the location of the run, wearing their gym clothes.

".....So, what's with that bicycle of yours, Inaba?"

For some reason, Inaba was the only one straddling a bicycle.

"Hmph, it's because I'm so devoted to being a leader who takes care of your safety that I did it on my own initiative."

".....And the real reason?"

"As if I would run around meaninglessly like an idiot!"

She was such an honest person.

"But Inaba, you don't come to school by bicycle, right? Where did you get it from?"

"I borrowed it from Fujishima. Right now, she'll do any sort of favors to anyone who recognizes her worth."

"D-Do any sort of favors....."

Gulp.

".....You're not thinking of anything lewd, are you?"

"N-Nothing of the sort, Inaba-san! Haha."

Since Inaba's eyes were staring sharply at him, Taichi hurriedly denied it.

"I'll get going first, then!"

Leaving those words, Inaba pedalled on her bicycle--- and seemed like she was about to go off, but she stopped.

"Whoops, I almost forgot."

Inaba reversed on her bicycle, and returned to Taichi's side. Their faces drew closer---

"Chu!<sup>[34]</sup> ♡"

"Oohhh, oi, oi..... oi!!"

Soft lips pressed onto Taichi's cheek.

"Fufu, that was a charm for you to do your best and get to the goal ♡"

Taichi was overwhelmed.

"That's, well, erm, happy, I'm happy that I got my first cheek kiss from Inaba..... but wouldn't it have been better if it wasn't right in front of everyone else?!"

He was drawing quite a lot of attention from the people surrounding him.

"Kya-" "Uwa~" "So jealous....."

Inaba also looked around and was taken aback. It seemed that she hadn't seen her surroundings before doing that. As they say, love is blind.

"Eh? .....Eh? .....Errrr..... Embarrassed~~~~~!"

Screaming, Inaba pedalled explosively and escaped on her bicycle.

Taichi, who was left behind, felt his heart racing as if he had just run a marathon. He was also sweating. For the time being, he took deep breaths and tried to calm down.

Since they were just extra participants of the track-and-field club's event, they took positions at the back of the starting area.

There were thirty or so people at the track-and-field side.

A girl appeared from that cluster.

She was tall, had short cut hair, and distinct facial features.

The word "cool" would be a fitting description for her. She was Oosawa Misaki.

Oosawa was involved once with the CRC. In their first year, Oosawa confessed to Kiriya, and when the two of them went on a date, the rest of the CRC tailed them.

"Yui-chan!" "Misaki-chan!"

"Yay!"

Clap! Kiriya and Oosawa did a high-five.

"I was so surprised that Yui-chan was taking part in the marathon. You guys are really too free-spirited." "Really sorry about this-" Like this, the two of them started conversing.

Anyone could see that they were really good friends.

Aoki also seemed to have noticed the pair, for he was giving them a scornful glare.

"Well, see you later, then..... Anyway, Yui-chan, think you can catch up to our speed?"

"As expected, I would lose to actual track-and-field club members. See you-!"

After the two of them had bid each other farewell, Taichi spoke up.

"Hey..... Kiriya."

"What is it?!"

He was just talking normally, but Kiriya was snarling and howling at him.

.....There was that previous offence of tailing the two of them during their date, so he kind of understood why she was so highly strung.

Perhaps it was nosy of him to ask after considering that it was difficult for Aoki to do so himself.

But afterwards, with red cheeks, Kiriya continued talking although Taichi hadn't asked her anything.



"I don't know what all of you are so worried about, but....."

Kiriyama glanced at Aoki's direction, and immediately looked away.

".....Misaki-chan's just a friend, and it's not in that way."

"Eh?" A foolish sound escaped from Aoki.

"I, I..... haven't just been doing nothing, you know."

Kiriyama's face was turning redder and redder.

"In other words..... you've turned down that person's approach, and because of that, that means..... that Yui has chosen me?!"

"Where and when did anyone say that?! I certainly didn't!"

After delivering a brief verbal jab, Kiriyama said, "I'll do stretching over there!" and ran off.

".....Taichi. Today, I..... I finally have a time to strike!"

"That's good."

Since Aoki seemed to be reveling in the afterglow, Taichi left him alone.

Since Nagase, Chihiro and Enjouji were gathered together, he decided to join the three of them.

"Shino-chan, let's aim for the goal together."

Nagase said to Enjouji.

"No..... please go at your own pace. Following all of you at your full power..... I believe that I can do it....."

"Well, if you say so, that's what we'll do, but are you really alright?"

"Ye, yes!"

"As for Chihhi..... you'll be running at your own pace even if I don't worry about you, right?"

"Yup. That's what I'll do."

"It was really unexpected to hear even Chihiro say that he would run."

Taichi commented, and Chihiro directed his usual cold stare at him.

"And because of that, Taichi-san ended up having to run, and it's a bother, right?"

"No, if I really didn't want to I would have refused. I just felt that it was unusual."

"Unusual, huh," Chihiro muttered, and looked away.

"Anyway."

Nagase's bright voice rang out.

"Just to make things clear..... the two of you are totally pumped to join the CRC, right?"

No one answered Nagase's question.

Even when both of them had volunteered to take part in the marathon on their own volition, they stayed silent.

Nagase's expression gradually became awkward.

"Well, then, changing the question, whether you feel the charm of the CRC---"

"All participants, please move to the starting positions!"

The starting time came in the middle of their conversation, and the curtain rose on the track-and-field club's new member welcome marathon (with additional CRC participants).



Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out.

Chihiro rhythmically inhaled and exhaled.

Oxygen circulated in his body.

He maintained a fixed rate of movement for his legs.

Uwa Chihiro continued running at a pace that was neither pushing his limits nor enjoyable.

Girls had to run 9km, while boys had a 12km course that included a huge detour in the middle.

It was somewhat intense, but at this rate, he probably wouldn't end up reaching the goal looking unsightly and worn out.

Since it was mostly made up of track-and-field people, he didn't care much about the time.

There was no winning or losing here, after all.

Then again, the big question here was why he was running in this manner.

Cultural Research Club.

There was some sort of explanation, but it was basically a club where the members did whatever they wanted and occasionally published a "CR News". If Yui hadn't dragged him there, he wouldn't have taken a look at that club.

He couldn't see any motive, reason or meaning.

He just couldn't understand what they were thinking at all.

Likewise, he couldn't understand himself now.

Although, there was something he wanted to know, and that was his motive.

But how long was he going to use that excuse?

What would he get out of joining a club that no one wanted, just by that reason? That would just be lame.

But of course, failing to read the atmosphere and misunderstand would be the most painfully lame.

He had thought that Enjouji was a painful person to be with, but she turned out to be an understandable character.

She wasn't an idiot, just a bit of a blockhead.

It would be totally bothersome to go to another club at this time. Although perhaps that would be better than becoming an idiot.

Then again, why did he stay put so long that it became troublesome? He would have been happier if he had just made his move yesterday or the day

before that.

*.....But what is Enjouji planning to do in the end?*

*She'd probably gone to check out other clubs. Or was she seriously just acting like an idiot?*

Chihiro thought, when a small body with fluffy white hair appeared in his field of vision.

It was evidently Enjouji Shino in her track suit.

Even though he had that 3km detour, he had already caught up.

She was slow, didn't seem to have much stamina left, but was still recklessly forging ahead.

With that weird running style, she would never reach the goal no matter how long she took..... Hm?

*That running style..... is there something wrong with her left foot?*

*I don't know if her leg's in pain, but it looks like she's in some sort of trouble.*

*Well, since I can't do anything, I guess I'm not involved.*

Chihiro ran up to Enjouji.

*I suppose I could at least call out to her,* he thought.

"You alright? If you can't do it, just stop running."

Leaving those words, he overtook Enjouji.

"Haa..... ah..... haah..... yes....."

He could hear a late response after some ragged breathing.

*Did someone in the same grade as me just say "yes"<sup>[35]</sup> to me?*

Chihiro ran ahead.

He could feel Enjouji behind him. He didn't check, but he thought that she probably had a pathetic look on her face.

He ran further ahead.

Enjouji's breathing sounds gradually disappeared.

But why did Enjouji volunteer to run? Also, she seemed to be staking something on this marathon.

Something like if she can properly reach the goal.

The extent of "properly" was unclear, but if it was tied down by position or timing, she would have definitely been out already. It could be just reaching the goal..... but that possibility was also slim.

*Anyway, what am I imagining? I'm such an idiot. Whatever.*

Chihiro continued moving on.

But in any case, it would end.

At that time, someone would become a fool. Someone would see a fool.

Chihiro progressed.

*What ending am I waiting for?*

*Whatever ending it will be..... which one do I want to see?*

*I want to see. I want to know..... yes, to understand.*

*I just want to know. How she'll be, and how they'll react. I just want to see that.*

*That's why---*

"Tsk..... Well, I guess I don't have a choice!"



The goal was atop a small hill in the nature park. It's elevation wasn't particular high, but the sloping path upward was flat and continued on for a long distance.

After more than an hour had passed, most people, including the CRC members, had reached the goal. Those who were faster had moved to another location in the park and started the preparations for the barbecue.

Kiriyama, who had arrived fairly early, was wearing a cool expression, while Nagase, who had reached the goal with about the same timing, wasn't even sweating. Taichi and Aoki, who had arrived after the two girls, were also breathing steadily now. Having only travelled on her bicycle, Inaba was also naturally composed (although she did joke around by saying that the final slope was really intense).

However, Chihiro and Enjouji's figures were nowhere to be found.

Inaba straddled her bicycle, while the four others sat on the floor.

"They're not coming, huh..... Maybe I should have had Shino-chan follow me even though she told me not to..... Then again, I didn't think it was good to weaken her motivation, either."

Nagase murmured.

"But Chihiro-kun has to be following her, right? It wouldn't make sense for Chihiro-kun to be so late otherwise."

Inaba responded to Kiriyama's words.

"That's what it seems like, from what I've heard."

"Then all we can do is wait."

Taichi spoke.

"Don't tell me they suddenly felt like they didn't want to run halfway and went home....."

"Taichi! Don't say these inauspicious things!"

He was warned by Nagase.

"The two of them did say that they would run on their own, so..... it'll be fine."

Kiriyama mumbled, as if talking to herself.

To cheer up the anxious Kiriyama, Aoki said brightly.

"Right! And after they properly reach the goal, the two of them will join the CRC!"

Nagase lay down on the open field.

"Ah~ I wonder if it's really fine~. They had fun visiting the clubs, and today I was thinking of showing them something cool with the marathon..... but somehow everyone ended up participating. I wonder if they are attracted by all these activities."

"We've done what we could. Now we can only wait for the conclusion....."

Taichi tilted his head as he said that.

At that moment, as if she had just noticed something, Inaba muttered.

"Somehow seems like we've only been waiting."

"Although that's been decided from the start," she added, and also tilted her head.

"Only" "Waiting"

Aoki started, and Kiriya continued.

And then Nagase spoke.

".....This time, haven't we had many such situations?"

*That's right. Even when considering that this was the direction that was decided on.*

*At first, Chihiro came, and when he was asked if he would join, he didn't reply with anything other than "I will positively consider it."*

*"Taichi-san, do you want us to join the club?"* When Taichi was asked this question, he couldn't answer it.

When they were questioned if they wanted to join the club, the two of them looked at the CRC, but didn't do anything.

They certainly wanted to have some new members, and they had tried to show off their charm, but..... what was next?

"Why did none of say something like 'Join the club' to Chihhi and Shino-chan?"

Nagase's words crashed down on them.

Indeed, they hadn't said anything of the sort, and instead merely waited for something to happen.

They were waiting for the two of them to say something like "I'll join" or "Let's be friends".

"I think that could be the root cause for them not being able to decide to join in the end."

It was obvious when you thought about it from their perspective.

The CRC was a club no one knew much about, and there were only two possible entrants of the same grade. Would it be fine not getting more friends in the same year? Could they get along well with the five second-year students?

There were probably innumerable points making them uncomfortable. But they ignored those fears and came to the CRC. They must have required quite some bravery.

And although they had mustered the courage and stepped up to the CRC, the people there had half-hearted attitudes towards them.

The CRC were certainly welcoming the new members. But they didn't give the final push, and instead entrusted it all to the hands of the two students.

That was because of «Heartseed».

But that wasn't all.

"I've thought about this a little, but everyone wants some fresh faces in the CRC, and yet we're hesitating, aren't we?"

Aoki accurately translated everyone's thoughts into words.

"I don't want to admit it, but..... I understand."

Nagase muttered, and everyone else mumbled similar things.

Taichi shut his eyes.

A world where nothing could be seen. But the bonds between the five of them could still be felt.

There was a community created just for the five of them, and that was the Yamaboshi High School's Cultural Research Club.



It was time to be honest.

He was slightly afraid of that space being destroyed.

At least, that was what Taichi felt. The rest probably had similar thoughts.

Then, they should understand why Chihiro and Enjouji couldn't make their decision in the end, even though they came to observe.

Since their hearts were open, their hearts could be opened.

Since their hearts could be opened, the CRC could open their hearts.

That was how it was.

"So while we want to have new comrades, we're afraid of them getting into our space, huh.

"And there's another thing to be scared about. That 'bastard' might get involved," she continued.

"Because of those events, we can't draw them in. That's what we said, but whether we do it proactively or let them decide independently, it would all be the same when they do join. There would be no change to the risk-exposed situation. What's different would be our pangs of conscience. I think we all understand this."

Like Inaba said, Taichi did understand it.

Although they had pretended not to see it at all.

"So what we have to do is properly face them, right? Without hiding anything."

Nagase said.

"Ahh..... Thinking about it now, we've all been horribly half-assed, huh. I think we've been too merry just because it's spring....."

Inaba grimaced regrettably.

Taichi went deep in thought again.

*It's difficult to find significance in our club. Yet there are kids who were thinking of jumping in.*

*But while we were aware of the demerits, all we did was wait proudly.*

*We pushed the responsibility onto others, while we escaped from the risk and still tried to reap the rewards. It was too arrogant of us.*

Knowing that him and his friends had probably taken the most half-assed attitudes, Taichi hid his shame and talked to the rest.

"Hey, guys. I'm checking once again, but considering all the factors, do you all want new members?"

Everyone nodded.

"We want Chihiro and Enjouji in the Cultural Research Club, right?"

"We do," everyone said.

"I also want the two of them..... to join."

Taichi also expressed his wishes clearly.

"It might be a bit late, but we should convey this to them. And then---"

Taichi said, then faltered.

That was probably an outrageous crime. That worry rose to Taichi's head.

However, he was able to instantly blow it away.

Because he could feel everyone else urging him on with their emotions.

"We will probably expose them to the danger of «Heartseed». We should face this crime squarely and seriously, and take responsibility for it."

As he spoke, Taichi thought, *As expected, this pentagon is amazing. If five of us are together, we can weather any storm.*

*And if two additional people join, it would become much more awesome and fun.*

*Even though it does depend on how the two of them decide in the end.*

*For now, let us do what we can, to strive for what we want to seek.*

*And then, we shall fight the terror of «Heartseed» without running away.*



*It hurts.*

Her left ankle was screaming in pain, and since she was walking in a weird way, her right leg was also starting to hurt. If she removed her shoes, she would probably find that her feet were swollen. It was now impossible to run, and she could only walk.

"Seriously, what do you mean, your ankle was sprained from yesterday? Didn't you say that you'd run?"

Walking next to her, Uwa Chihiro was telling her off.

"So, .....Sorry. Until I started running..... I forgot."

Enjouji said, as she felt so apologetic that she wanted to disappear.

".....Whatever, it's fine."

Chihiro was walking with her and matching her pace the whole time.

"Umm..... Perhaps you should just go ahead first."

"I don't have the guts to leave you behind here. Eh~, the arrow's here, so..... Geh."

Chihiro stood still. Shino also stopped and looked up at the front.

There was an extensively long hill ahead of them. They would reach the goal after overcoming that obstacle.

".....It's crazy to have this at the end."

Chihiro muttered and looked at Shino.

"Shouldn't we give up here? I could go up to the goal alone, inform the people there and return. Anyway, I wonder if there are still people waiting at the goal? Since we're not outsiders....."

"Eh..... but..... but."

Unable to find any other words, that was all she could say.

*Is it really..... impossible?*

"I guess..... we'd be a bother to anyone waiting, although there's probably no one there."

Those who had reached the goal already, including the Cultural Research Club members, would have moved to a different area by now.

*So I couldn't reach it, she thought.*

*I probably won't be able to catch up to it in my entire life.*

*I don't have a chance. That's the kind of world this is. Time to accept it and---*

"Enjouji..... Why did you want to join this club?"

She was suddenly questioned by Chihiro.

It was a strange question considering the flow of the conversation, so she was perplexed.

"Oi, are you listening?"

Chihiro frowned and said.

"Eh?! Yes, I'm listening, I'm listening."

*Why did I want to join this club?*

"Um..... It's not so much that I want to join....."

"Spare me that crap. You've always been coming to observe, and at the point where you decided to participate in the marathon, isn't it obvious that you want to join?"

".....Does that mean that you also want to, Chihiro-kun?"

"You picking a fight?"

"No, not at all! No!"

*I wonder why he thinks that I'm trying to argue with him. I really don't know.*

After a breath, Shino answered.

".....It's dazzling, that's what I thought. I admired them, I suppose. I guess I'm like a bug, being drawn to light like that."

She said the last bit jokingly, but Chihiro listened with a serious expression.

For some reason, he seemed to be moved.

Chihiro probably also has some part similar to her.

Like her, Chihiro also had an interest in the Cultural Research Club.

"But then," Chihiro started.

"Why not anywhere else? Why here?"

"That's because..... it's the most amazing, that's what I felt."

Shino thought that Chihiro would get angry and tell her to answer properly, but he didn't.

"Amazing..... huh."

Those words spilled and fell out of Chihiro's mouth.

Assisted by the heartrending evening light, they somehow fell into a mysterious mood.

Now, they wouldn't feel embarrassed no matter what they said. It was that kind of atmosphere.

"That's what..... I was wondering if it's fine for me there, if I'm out of place."

"Can't say I don't understand."

Chihiro agreed. It was unexpected, but Shino was quite happy with that, so she continued.

"If we say that we want to join, those people would definitely let us in, right? But then whether we will be able to do things well afterwards is a different problem, I think. Even now, they're probably thinking something like 'Are these people really going to join?'..... So..... As I thought....."

While she talked, she clearly realized that because she was always like this, she would remain in the same place no matter how much time passed. If she stepped in recklessly, things would probably change, but she didn't want to be a nuisance to someone else.

"Enjouji, you aren't an idiot like I thought. You can read the mood, after all."



".....You make it seem like you always thought that I'm an idiot."

"I did think that you were a blockhead."

"I see, a blockhead, huh? .....Blockhead?! That's terrible-"

"Your slowness the one's that terrible."

The two of them laughed a little. It was probably the first time Shino properly saw Chihiro laugh.

A short time passed.

And then Chihiro asked a question, making it seem like he was making a final announcement.

"So Enjouji, you're alright with this? You're going to quit running and not join the Cultural Research Club, right?"

Questioned by Chihiro, Shino hesitated with reluctance and regret. *Maybe I should try again, but that's not expected of me.*

---At that moment, loud voices resounded from up the hill.

"Chihhi~~~~~! Shino-chan~~~~~! We're waiting~~~~~! Also!! Please join the CRC~~~~~!"

It was Iori's voice.

"Chihiro-kun~~~~~! Make sure you properly escort Shino-chan!~~~~~! It'll be fun if the two of you join the club, so we're waiting~~~~~!"

Yui's voice rang out.

"Hurry up and get here~~~~~! And!! We'll gorge ourselves at the barbecue~~~~~! I'm fine with being friends without any sense of seniority~~~~~!"

That was Aoki's voice.

"Why are you making your senpais wait~~~~~! Hurry up and come to the goal already~~~~~!"

It was Inaba's voice.

"As for me!! I welcome the two of you~~~~~! It'll definitely be fun, so!!! Let's be friends~~~~~!"

Taichi's voice came.

Shino just stood still and listened to the downpouring voices with a dazed expression.

*What's this? It's so amazingly warm.*

She could feel that it wasn't just voices that were transmitted, but emotions too.

And then, she felt that the thing she was most lacking in had just been given to her.

".....So, what will you do?"

Chihiro asked.

*I might be a slow blockhead without much ability to understand, but---*

"Your face has 'Let's go together' written on it, Chihiro-kun."

*---I can understand that now is that time to accomplish what I've always wanted to do deep in my heart.*



"If you're in this club, something extremely bad could happen. Well, the possibility of that is quite low, and when that happens we'll definitely protect you. Although, we can't exactly say for sure, so....."

Chihiro and Enjouji gaped at Taichi, who was speaking gravely.

"What are you talking about, Taichi-san?"

"Just some important information we have to convey to the two of you, now that you've decided to enter the CRC."

At that moment, Aoki barged into their conversation.

"Now, just forget about it and don't worry about it! If you don't hurry, the meat's going to disappear, Chihiro! You should eat more!"



"Let's eat!"

Aoki and Chihiro started an assault towards the barbecue nettings.

After participating in the track-and-field club's marathon, the CRC shamelessly intruded on the barbecue party, which was held at the nature park's facilities.

Since it was the track-and-field club's event, they were naturally hesitant, but the boys in the track-and-field club strongly insisted, "It's fine! Please eat with us! In exchange, we hope..... for just one time..... please come down to support us for our competitions! We're counting on you!", and the CRC split up. (Incidentally, at that time, the boys cheered jubilantly, "Alright!! Let's show them how cool we are at the competition! Uohhhhh!")

Taichi and Enjouji were left behind.

"Come to think of it, what was your reason for wanting to join the CRC, Enjouji?"

The person in question brought her shoulders up jerkily and stiffened.

"Um..... That's..... It's..... Um....."

"It's fine if you don't want to answer. And relax a bit when you're talking, yeah?"

"Yes, yessssssss!"

".....Totally not relaxed at all."

"What happened?" "What's up?"

Nagase and Inaba approached.

"Ah, nothing much," Taichi was about to reply.

"P-P-P-Please let me answer!"

Enjouji stuttered.

"So, what are you going to answer?"

Nagase was immensely curious.

"Thanks to the words of encouragement from everyone..... I managed to decide to join the club, so..... explaining why I had an interest in the Cultural

Research Club..... would be the courteous thing to do, I think!"

"I see! Good spirit, Shino-chan! Now tell us at once!"

Nagase said happily, and Enjouji moved her head in a nodding motion.

"The first thing is that..... I admire all of you."

"Admire?"

Inaba asked.

"Ye, yes..... I just happened to see all five of you together, and there was no discrimination between girls and guys, and you all were friendly to one another. It seemed really fun, and I felt that it was amazing and it was exactly the kind of high school life I wanted..... At that time, I heard you talking about the Cultural Research Club, so....."

"I see, it's not a weird reason, is it? Why did you hide it?"

Taichi asked. Enjouji looked down and muttered, "It, it's somewhat embarrassing....."

"So, when you said 'first', you mean that there's other reasons, right?"

Nagase asked.

"Ye, yes..... The other reason is....."

Enjouji peeked at Taichi's face.

That went on for ten seconds, and while Taichi and the rest were staring on dubiously, Enjouji proclaimed decisively.

"I like Taichi-senpai!!"

".....Eh?"

Taichi stiffened. His thought process was at a standstill.

"Eh?! That's, seriously, crazy, isn't it?!"

Nagase exclaimed disconcertedly.

"H-H-Hey..... T-T-That's..... W-What do you mean..... Ahhh."

Inaba was panicking so much that she dropped her plate and chopsticks.

"Taichi-senpai's..... voice!!"

".....Hm?"

"Erm, just his voice?"

In place of Taichi who couldn't use his head or mouth, Nagase asked to confirm.

"Yes, completely, unequivocally, just his voice! Taichi-senpai's voice has this deep resonance~, and it matches so well when he's talking calmly~, and it's so ideal, like listening to classical music~"

Enjouji said joyfully.

*Oh, so it's just my voice being popular. Just my voice.*

"Just his voice..... then what about Taichi himself?"

This time, Inaba asked.

"On the contrary, I can't do it when I find out about personal lifestyle. I oppose aesthetically. No thank you."

Enjouji proclaimed smartly.

*Really..... that girl has one or two quirks to her name.*



It was nearing the end of the barbecue party.

With his stomach filled and nothing to do, Uwa Chihiro aimlessly loitered around the premises of the nature park after taking a trip to the toilet.

In the end, or rather, because of the flow of the situation, he had actually said that he would join the Cultural Research Club. He was now wondering what Taichi was talking about when he said, "If you're in this club, something extremely bad could happen."

"Oh, if it isn't Chihhi."

He was found by Nagase. It was probably a chance encounter, though.

"Is there a toilet here?"

"No, it's over there."

"Ah, I see. Thanks."

Nagase was moving in the direction instructed by Chihiro, but stopped.

"Oh yeah, Chihhi. I have something I'm curious about."

Nagase turned around. At that same moment, a breeze went past.

Her black hair, dyed scarlet by the evening sunlight, danced in the wind.

Colored in perfect proportions, her mere track suit looked like an altogether different set of clothes.

"With your personality, you're not the type to praise someone else as cute, right?"

She asked in a cold, transparent voice. Just by listening to it, Chihiro unconsciously straightened his posture.

But he couldn't really understand the meaning behind those words.

"Because you're an edgy character. Ah, not in a bad sense."

".....I suppose?"

He was caught by her lucid eyes. Beautiful, but at the same time, somewhat scary.

"I remember being praised by you once, though."

"Now that you mention it..... I think so too."

"I was thinking that it contradicts your image. And then it hit me. If you praise someone while being relatively indifferent towards them, that praise becomes like an appeal, right? So in other words---"

"Nagase-san!!"

Chihiro instinctively raised his voice to drown out Nagase's words.

Nagase blinked incessantly.

"I mean....., erm..... nothing."

*What am I even saying?*

But all Nagase did was give a gentle smile, like that of the Virgin Mary.

"Sorry, sorry..... Well, don't get into a romance that you'll regret..... I---"

"Eh?"

Whatever Nagase said at the end, it was blocked out by the rustling of the trees, and Chihiro couldn't hear it.



After parting with Nagase, Chihiro walked off without returning to where everyone else was.

Instead, he headed towards an empty copse in the nature park.

He wanted to be alone for a while so that he could cool down.

His head was filled with that exchange with Nagase.

*What was with that attitude? As if that was the reality of it. I was too bashful and pathetic. That was lame. Insignificant.*

"How worthless."

Chihiro cursed.

".....Worthless, you say....."

Chihiro could hear an ominous voice so low that it seemed to sink into the ground.

He looked around at his surroundings.

There was a figure of a person in the darkness.

"W-Who are you?!"

Chihiro shouted, and the figure answered in a sluggish, apathetic tone.

"Who..... you say..... I see..... «Heartseed», I suppose."

(Kokoro Connect 4.5 Clip Time The End)

# Author's Notes

I truly express my gratitude for you readers that bought this book.

The fifth volume is a continuation from the first, second, third, and fourth volumes, and it is the series' first short story volume.

Just like that, I am Kokoroco's<sup>[36]</sup> Sadanatsu Anda. Kokoroco!

I finally broke free from Random<sup>[37]</sup>, 【Where are you talking about!?】 there must be people who think this way, so I added 【Time】 to this short story volume.

Actually I have already decided on the next short story volume, even though I can't say that 【it absolutely will be released!】

Of course, if it were, I'd be really happy! Really happy! Really happy!

Well, for those that don't care about phrases like 【Please support me!】, there isn't much space remaining. I can't put detailed explanations of the short stories here, something usually seen in short story volumes. Why, you say... well, it's because it will add on to my manuscript. To tell you the truth, 【Kokoro Connect】 always manages to exceed the predetermined page count, and completed after a countless number of cuts! This volume is no exception, so I still followed my usual practice.

After saying what seems like and doesn't seem like a creator's secret, it is time for my thank-yous.

Firstly, I am very grateful for readers that supported this series since the earlier volumes. I was also very moved upon reading the postcards received from the drama CD event. There were so many that I still haven't looked at most of them, but I still briefly read some and saw many thoughts written, as well as some very talented drawings... I will read through all of them, even if it will take me some time!

And once again I put plenty of burdens on the higher-ups as well as everyone

involved in the publication. I am incredibly grateful for all your help.

And Shiromizakana-sensei. The new characters were excellent! Thank — you for all this time!

And finally I must publicize CUTEg-sensei's currently selling **【Kokoro Connect】** manga!

Well then, once again I give every reader my sincerest gratitude.

If only this book is able to give Japan more spirit.

April 2011, Sadanatsu Anda.



年上女子 & 年下男子に弱い

私は4キロ & 唯が

とても気になる

所です。(笑)

青木君へ



# References

1. ↑ Implies messy writing, when words aren't written in straight lines.
2. ↑ The anniversary of the founding of the school
3. ↑ Whistling to embarrass someone else. (I believe there is an English word for it, but I can't think of it right now)
4. ↑ This refers to two-sided love, while the first line refers to unrequited love.
5. ↑ Gap Moe is when a character does something completely contradictory to what their usual habits/personality/character/appearance dictates.
6. ↑ A dialect spoken in the Kansai region(obviously). Here I tried translating it to Southern slang.
7. ↑ Japanese humor usually has a person playing the role of the fool and making an asinine statement, and someone else playing the straight man and delivering a retort in response.
8. ↑ The speech brackets are also embedded in the original text, and I'm not exactly sure why. Perhaps it's to show that both of them said it at the same time.
9. ↑ Opposite of déjà vu.
10. ↑ I assume that this is a game like Dance Dance Revolution. I'm not sure if there's a phrase in English for such games.
11. ↑ In the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, an indulgence is "a way to reduce the amount of punishment one has to undergo for sins".

12. ↑ This story was originally written with the narration of a narrator(whoever he/she is), Inaba Himeko's thoughts and her narration. It is quite inconsistent writing, so I decided to just make this entire story narrated by Inaba. Please try to live with it.
13. ↑ “What a fine weather today! Can’t choose whether to drink tea or to hang myself.”  
— Anton Chekhov
14. ↑ I don't know why the previous translator referenced one of Anton Chekhov's not so famous quotes. I've been searching for a link but I can't even find that quote in Japanese. If anyone knows, please share.
15. ↑ Here Aoki pronounces it as "Ron-de-bu", when it should be as Iori pronounces it, "Ron-de-vu". Iori says that Aoki's pronunciation sounds round because "de-bu" is an insulting term for a fat person.
16. ↑ Japanese term for Lolita complex, where a person is sexually attracted to young girls.
17. ↑ "Weird" and "change" use the same character, 変.
18. ↑ The Greek God of sexual desire and attraction
19. ↑ Pitch as in throwing a ball. This means saying something such that the other party can understand, or "catch" it.
20. ↑ I think she's referring to the one taught in physics lessons, that the current through a conductor between two points is directly proportional to the voltage across the two points.
21. ↑ In other, less dignified words, a panty-shot. The words combine panties(pan) and glimpse(chira in Japanese). This is quite important for later on.
22. ↑ Silent mode for us non-Japanese people.
23. ↑ Apricot glaze, in other words.

24. ↑ This phrase means working yourself up even though there isn't anything to fight at.
25. ↑ Non-SI name for micrometer, which is 1000 times smaller than a millimeter.
26. ↑ With the implication that they make it easy for others to spout nonsense.
27. ↑ A wrestling match where some item is hung on top of the ring and contestants climb ladder(s) to retrieve the item.
28. ↑ As you can tell, I'm trying really hard to keep Yui's statements as gender-neutral as possible.
29. ↑ Like in an RPG.
30. ↑ A sort of soft mohawk (hair is a little spiky) with an asymmetric cut and wolf layers.
31. ↑ Due to Japanese polite speech, Fujishima's words could have been construed as "has continued", but said politely, which is why Iori checked with her.
32. ↑ Because calling people by their family name is polite, and politeness could be used as currency.
33. ↑ Refers to the life force every person and thing supposedly has.
34. ↑ The sound of a kiss.
35. ↑ This is polite compared to something like "Yeah" or "Yup".
36. ↑ Kokoroco (ココロコ) is the series' abbreviation.
37. ↑ The previous novels are all in the format *XX Random*. This volume is instead named *Clip Time*.

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# **Kokoro Connect - Volume 04.5 - Clip Time**

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